

THE KINSFOLK

BY

JAMES C. BURKE

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PROLOGUE

Shortly after sunset, Gaston Calder opened the windows of the second-story drawing room to let in the evening breeze. Lounging on the sofa eating spiced dried fruit and sipping Madera, his wife Louisa fanned herself. The heat, compounded by thick humidity, was oppressive, drawing away every measure of ambition. It had been sultry for much of the week, but frequent evening thunderstorms provided welcome relief. When at home, Louisa shed her day dress and relaxed luxuriantly in a light cotton chemise. Gaston sat in a chair by the window after dinner smoking his cigars. Their few months together quickly raced forward to satisfaction: Gaston was a remarkable businessman, and Louisa's family supplied the materials and capital. Within weeks of commencing their collaboration on what was intended to be a ruse to mask conspiracy to commit cold-blooded murder, one evening's diversion escalated in a heartbeat to unconstrained passion. Without notice and no regard for convention, they married in mid-April, having the ceremony performed at a country church on a weekday. Their lumber mill was up and running the next day; and within a week, shipments of logs, cut from the vast stands of ancient pines on the Littlefield lands, were being brought down river. One month into the venture, the mill was operating at capacity. The taste of success was delightfully refreshing, but the excitement they shared in seeing the old mill brought back to life was enthralling. Soon, they felt as though it was a long sought-after dream, even though they knew otherwise. It was driven by their mutual pleasure in themselves.

Gradually, they were drifting away from the imperatives of the *Kinsfolk* who had bankrolled their enterprise. On this Tuesday, they were jolted back in line with a report of renewed activity by one of their intended targets, a certain railroad detective named Marcus Cassidy. Gaston, blowing smoke out the open window, told Louisa,

"The fellow from the ticket office that we are paying to keep an eye out had a fascinating tidbit for us today, my love. It seems to be

Mr. Cassidy took the express to Orchard Depot this morning.” She replied,

“On his own?”

“Oh, indeed! Had Mr. Thomas sent him, he would have been accompanied by company men. That suggests several things. He has discovered new evidence and is pursuing it without the blessing of his chief, or the old boy is tired of looking over his shoulders. The most likely motive for this abrupt departure might be something more lucrative. Mr. Thomas’ precious ladies sent for him.” Louisa rose from the couch, and filled her glass from a decanter. Gaston continued,

“We will know if he comes back.” Louisa walked to Gaston’s chair, sat down on its arm, and then placed her hand on his shoulder. She said,

“Tell me, dear, if he returns, do you think it would be the right time to get rid of him? It seems that many are under the impression that he brought an end to the murders when he shot my former employee. Mr. Thomas, as we know, is too well guarded; and from what I gather, is waiting for us.” Gaston replied,

“True... I suppose you are looking forward to settling scores with Mr. Cassidy?”

“I would find that very satisfying. It would please me immeasurably to perform the act by myself – with your able assistance, of course.”

“While I am sure it would please our patrons; I am a little reluctant to arouse the authorities for one trophy. We could be done with this by simply abducting Jane Wyche or her sister.”

“Insomuch as I would like to pry our patrons’ property from the ladies, we cannot harm them in any way. It is a conundrum, Gaston; who else but they could have the bonds? Certainly, Mr. Thomas does not! He would have wasted little time in turning the evidence over to the court.”

“Those two ladies had limited places and opportunities to hide them. If Cassidy returns, I am inclined to think he will lead us to the spot.” Louisa took a sip of wine, and stroked Gaston’s hair as she spoke.

“If I were Jane Wyche, my first inclination would be to persuade Mr. Cassidy to retrieve the bonds and spirit me away, far from the reach of danger and Mr. Thomas. What do you think, Gaston?”

“I think we need to have our eyes at Orchard Depot waiting for him. By the time he arrives here, we will be ready to follow him to the hiding place. I would prefer that we merely waylay him, and take what he finds. It would be a theft that he would have difficulty reporting, don’t you think? Killing him will create too much of a stir about town.” Louisa said,

“On learning that he is coming; we will be waiting – you at the McAdams House, and I will be watching the Wyche Mansion. Since the ladies are absent, Mr. Thomas has installed a caretaker at both houses, no armed guards.”

“Very good!” After taking a puff from Gaston’s cigar, Louisa said,

“I will disguise myself as a man.”

“Kinsfolk”, in the Southern sense, was a precise description of their common bond – the Littlefields, Guthries, Calders, and Huffmans. Their domination of Gilridge County and the region dated back to colonial times when their land-hungry ancestors grabbed up the first Royal Patents. The patriarchs, from the comfort of their estates in Barbados, lured the first settlers to the wild forestlands that fronted the river. It was a package deal that included slaves. All that was required of the settlers was one fifth of their produce or an annual payment in coin per acre, whichever was the greater. In those early years, many settlers failed; but not without heroic efforts to clear and plant. When the patriarchs reclaimed the land, it usually passed into the possession of their kin. Thus, until the Civil War, *The Kinsfolk* controlled the local economy and politics. It was after Reconstruction, and largely founded on the skills

developed during this time, that a secret inner circle of these aristocrats turned from gentlemanly swindling to violent crime. Their principal objective was to rig elections and drive out reformers. All the same, there was a certain audacious crime committed by the patriarchs that predated their long history of terrorizing the citizens of Gilridge County.

That same evening, a young law student named Andrew Jackson “Little Jack” Greene arrived at the Union Depot in Gilridge on the evening express. He was met by his father, Dr. Phillip Greene, Sheriff William Tate, and county coroner, Dr. Gilbert Lovejoy. Over the period of a year, three notable gentlemen of the town suffered horrific deaths. The first, Judge Richard Coats inexplicably was struck by a train on the Northeast River Bridge. Dr. Lovejoy concluded he was drunk, but it was impossible to determine a rational explanation of how he ended up ten miles from town in a sparsely populated corner of the county, in the middle of a railroad bridge. Still, he was not far from the station on the opposite side of the river. It could have been an accident. The deaths of state senator William Grundy Littlefield and railroad superintendent, Colonel Joseph Wyche were assassinations. The only thing these men had in common was an abiding bond of friendship with Little Jack’s mother Judith Ward Greene and the knowledge of the existence of a cache of English bearer bonds which she hid before Gilridge was captured by the Union Army. Needless to say, the bonds did not remain concealed. With the resurfacing of the bonds, there were several unsuccessful attempts on Mrs. Greene’s life, and she was forced to flee town under the protection of a former Union officer turn private detective, Captain John Willard. Travelling under the assumed identity of Mrs. Minerva Beech, a journalist in the employment of the railroad, she struggled to understand how her life was upended by an event in the distant past. Colonel Wyche’s daughter, Malvina, a very strange woman with a photographic memory, saw the letter enclosed with the bonds and described it in detail to Dr. Greene. The letter head belonged to the commercial house of Hamilton LeQuire & Son. It was Little Jack, however, who took it upon himself to lend his services to the authorities. Now, the origin of the bonds was

coming to light. Immediately, upon disembarking from the cars, Jack called out,

“Father, I was right!” They proceeded by carriage to the hospital. Dr. Lowe, the director, allowed the sheriff use of his cottage. When all were settled, Jack asked,

“Have you heard anything from Mother?” Dr. Greene handed Jack the Sunday issue of the *Messenger* and said,

“Mrs. Minerva Beech wrote a nice little story about the history of Baltimore – Bishop John Carroll, Robert Mills’ monument to Washington, and so forth; closing with ‘Oh, how it would have been wonderful if my other son could have joined us on this trip. Being away at college, his studies are foremost on his mind.’” Jack said,

“Other son? Oh-no, is this something new?” Dr. Greene laughed.

“You’re beginning to sound like me. One of Captain Willard’s men is acting the part of her son. In any case, don’t you think she is an impressive journalist?” Jack closed the paper, then said,

“Of course, she is amazing beyond belief. Now, let us discuss this matter of Newton & LeQuire, formerly, Hamilton LeQuire & Son. As I suspected, the bonds were stolen from the latter in November of 1858. Rather, they were pinched while in transit to their office in Charleston. A number of planters were the intended recipients of the bonds, each investing several thousand dollars. After presenting the letter Sheriff Tate prepared to explain the purpose of my inquiry, I was given a list of their names by the firm’s attorney. The firm has a reward for information leading to the apprehension of the thieves.” Sheriff Tate said,

“Could I see that list?” After handing it to the coroner, Jack continued,

“A courier delivering the bonds from London was waylaid and set upon in Nassau. An investigation started early the next year, but led nowhere. Then, in late 1860, a lady living in Charleston told Hamilton LeQuire, Jr. that she knew where the bonds were hidden,

but wanted a reward for the information. He told her that if the bonds were recovered, she would receive her reward. The location she described was in North Carolina. However, South Carolina seceded in December; and North Carolina, still in the Union at the time, belonged to another country. LeQuire soon moved to New York, but the investigation faltered when North Carolina joined the Confederacy... and then there was the war. From their letter book, I have a copy of a later communication that you might find rather enlightening. I will get to that shortly.” Dr. Lovejoy, glancing at the list of names, interjected,

“Some of these names are local gentlemen! I visited with one not long ago with my niece Myrtle: Jeremiah Littlefield... Jane Wyche’s father, and uncle of the late Senator Littlefield; he has another daughter, Susan.” Dr. Greene grumbled,

“I would like to know why Malvina’s 'friend' is named Susan. How old is this other daughter?” Lovejoy answered,

“Twenty-five, or maybe, a year or two older. Dr. Greene, there is an abandoned school at Oak Crossroads called the Female Seminary. Malvina attended there.” Somewhat puzzled, Jack looked at the coroner, and then shook his head.

“Please, let us not become distracted by extraneous details. A few months back, an attorney in New York placed a considerable quantity of the bonds up for sale. They are bearer bonds; so, there are no records kept concerning their ownership. However, LeQuire’s agent in London recorded the numbers printed on the bonds, so they know that those appearing on the market are the same.” Dr. Greene asked,

“Isn’t that proof enough?”

“No, Father, LeQuire cannot prove rightful ownership thoroughly with the numbers because they were not registered to the firm by the house that issued them. The money put up by the investors to purchase the instruments was restored to them, nearly putting LeQuire & Son out of business, requiring them to form a partnership with Newton. How did the thieves know that the

company courier was carrying the bonds? Somebody inside the firm must have told them!”

Tate asked,

“Why are they not trying to dispute the ownership of the bonds that have appeared on the market?” Jack replied,

“The per annum coupons, up to present, were redeemed by the person who presented them – that is, a lawyer. Beginning in 1868 and ending in 1888, a coupon could be redeemed each year in July for one-twentieth of the value of each bond - £50, plus accrued interest at six per cent. This means thirteen of twenty coupons were redeemed for fifty bonds. The bonds with their remaining coupons were sold at a discount. Newton & LeQuire purchased some of them.” Dr. Greene asked,

“Exactly, what are you saying, son?”

“They want the rest of the bonds, and are offering a substantial reward. If they take legal action now, they may never recover the remainder. We know they are here, and whoever delivered half of them to New York was the person in possession of all the bonds or acting as their agent.” Tate said,

“After we eliminate the dead, who is left?” Jack asked,

“Who is this Mr. Thomas? Does anybody really know him?”

CHAPTER ONE

December 21, 1878. Throughout the 1850s, German families immigrated to the South. Among those settling in Gilridge was the Klieneburger family. Helmut and his son Wilhelm were brewers. Both also organized the German Volunteers during the war. In the 1870s, they relocated their brewery from its original location near the shipyard on the Southside to the rundown Ryan estate on Rose Street at the northeast boundary of town. The old entrance to the cemetery was at the head of the street; later it was moved to the adjacent street, Mulberry Avenue. The land that they purchased covered two blocks. Their timing could not have been better.

In 1869, the construction of an iron bridge over the river enabled the two other railroads terminating at Gilridge to move their yards. Union Depot was established to facilitate through traffic south and north. The jointly owned depot made it possible for through trains to continue in either direction without having to stop in the Lower Yards along the river. It was located five blocks from the Ryan house. Suddenly, the site of the secluded mansion became rather active, with every omnibus from the hotels throughout the city coming and going via Rose Street several times a day. Helmut saw the potential for making money off being close to the depot. He also had a long-cherished passion for making for himself a reminder of the old country of his youth. Klieneburger's Beer Garden was a glorious transformation of the Ryan place. The quaint wood shop contained the brewery, and the mansion was redesigned as a hotel. The grounds were planted with decorative shrubs, and a large plaza paved with stone was constructed in the center of the garden. Throughout the summer months, brass bands performed on the porch, a message to passersby looking for lodging or entertainment. A bowling alley and billiard room were constructed next to the hotel. The gentry of the city occasionally frequented the beer garden, but Bible-thumpers considered it somewhat of an immoral place. However, the Lutheran and Episcopalian men, the core of the local business community were regulars. It was more wholesome than the

saloons on River Street – establishments that had existed long before. The joyful climax of the social history of Klieneburger's Beer Garden came with a grand celebration held on December 21, 1878. From early morning on that Saturday, guests enjoyed a musical performance fitting for the season; four sumptuous meals served with Champaign, and hot cider strolls in the garden. The evening culminated in a party held in the mansion's ballroom.

In attendance at the 1878 Christmas Party was a forty-eight-year-old physician named Dr. Jacob Lowe. In a few years, he would accept the appointment of first director of County Hospital. Ironically, when the beer garden was put up for sale, the county purchased the property as the site of the new hospital. Present also was Wilhelm's daughter Myrtle, a pleasant young lady of sixteen years old. Jacob became acquainted with her later when she became engaged to a young doctor at the hospital named John Wilson. Her Aunt Mina was married to Dr. Lovejoy. Lowe's partner in practice after the war was his older mentor, Dr. Phillip Greene. Greene also knew Myrtle's mother Annaliese rather well. She assisted them as a volunteer nurse at the start of the war, caring for the sick and wounded soldiers frequently brought to the military hospital that fronted the railroad. At the start of the war, it was originally located on the edge of town beyond the cemetery. Myrtle spent most of her childhood away at school in Europe. Her father said that his decision proved to be the best course for his daughter. Encouraging her aspirations to attend a college for young women in England, she did not return to Gilridge for several years. During the late 1870s, she continued her studies in France where she was introduced to the study of medicine. On returning home, she found herself out of step with local society. Her interests turned in the direction of her uncle's work. Later, she taught at Quinley Hogg College – opened in 1878, five blocks beyond the cemetery on Mulberry Hill. Eventually, her son Hugh became county coroner. There was, however, one encounter that evening that had monumental consequences for years to come.

It was early evening when Colonel Wyche pulled Dr. Lowe away from the speech of the sanitation commissioner to introduce him to his daughter, Malvina Wyche McAdams. She was the widow of the

former assistant superintendent of the Central Railroad. Dr. Greene, the Colonel's best friend had recommended the match. They walked out to the gardens. Outside, Malvina, then thirty-one years old, was listening to the brass band playing various waltzes and seasonal music. After making the proper introductions, the Colonel left. Dr. Lowe asked her if she would like a glass of wine. She did. In short order, he returned with two glasses of hot *glühwein*.

"Oh, this is glorious, don't you think? I cannot recall the last occasion I have had such a wonderful time! My goodness, what is this you have here?"

"This is hot spiced wine."

"Thank you so much, sir!" She accepted it with a girlish smile.

"Have you ever been here before Mrs. McAdams?"

"No sir, I didn't even know this place was here."

"Surely, dear lady, you are joking. Your house is only about five blocks away, isn't it?"

"My father usually takes me to the town to dine and attend the theatre."

"You mean you cannot hear the band when they play?"

"I have! This is a happy place, to be sure! The wine has cinnamon and cloves. Did you taste it?"

"I believe you are right!" Taking his arm, she said,

"We have been paired together for the evening by my father. He is Colonel Joseph Wyche, superintendent of the railroad! Do you know him?"

"I know of him; not well, but I know he and Dr. Greene are best friends."

"Yes, my father and Dr. Greene conspired to put us together. I don't mind it. You strike me as a very thoughtful and kind man; and I imagine you are a widower. Might I be so bold to ask?"

“No, it is not so bold, particularly since I am not. I have never married.”

“Never married? I hope you are not betrothed. It would not be right. Somebody might see us together and tell her!”

“I am not engaged, Mrs. McAdams... Out of curiosity, what made you think I was a widower?”

“Everybody refers to me as the “Widow McAdams”; so, I assumed my father exercised a little forethought and matched me with a widower. You seem about the right age.” Dr. Lowe was slightly insulted.

“I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“Oh no, you're mistaking what I said! I am very happy to be with you! There is nothing wrong with being an old bachelor. No, I did not mean to say that! You are older than me, but not so old I might expect to become a widow twice over soon; that is, if I become particularly fond of you. I hope you do not think poorly of me for speaking my mind?” Dr. Lowe mulled over this remark, then exclaimed,

“What?”

“I am very fond of you already Do you like me?”

“Why would I not like you, Mrs. McAdams? We just met.”

“Oh... that's right! How long has it been?” Dr. Lowe was even more puzzled than ever. He asked,

“Since we met?”

“Yes! Check your watch.”

Dr. Lowe, complying with her request, took the watch from his pocket and looked at it. He was feeling befuddled by this very strange conversation. On seeing the case of his pocket watch open; she gasped in amazement.

“Oh, it is beautiful! May I see?” He held out the watch in his open palm. She picked it up with both hands, pulling the fob loose from his vest.

“Where did you get it, Dr. Lowe?”

“Dr. Greene gave it to me.”

“Did you know that Mrs. Greene fixes watches? She is a remarkable lady with so many skills. I was her student in the Academy for Young Ladies – I assume you were off at the war in those days – Then we took care of Little Jack. According to this wonderful timepiece, we have known each other for precisely twenty-three minutes... I think...” Malvina opened the tiny gold watch hanging from a long delicate chain she wore like a pendent. After comparing the two watches, she said,

“We are off by a minute.” Malvina handed Dr. Lowe back his watch as she looked at the face of her timepiece, and sighed,

“I thought we had known each other longer. Forgive me for my effrontery, sir.”

“Mrs. McAdams, I do not know what to say. Please remind me what we were talking about.”

“Do you like me?”

“Yes, I do.” At that moment, the band started playing and Malvina’s face lit up.

“Oh, it is a waltz! Would you ask me to dance Dr. Lowe?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know how.”

“Never? Did you not learn to do so in your school?”

“No. Never.”

“Would you like to try?”

“Would you like another glass of wine, Mrs. McAdams? Perhaps, I can find cake for you or some other treat?” With the mention of treats, Malvina was no longer interested in dancing. She replied,

“Oh, would you?”

“Let me take your glass. I will be back shortly.”

“Just one thing more, Dr. Lowe.”

“What would you like? I would be happy to find it.”

“Butter cookies... and I like you too! I hope we will have time to get to know each other better.”

After the Christmas party, Jacob Lowe frequently thought about Malvina McAdams. Occasionally, he called on her when she was staying at Colonel Wyche’s mansion on First Avenue. Always delighted to see him, coffee and ice cream were served on her insistence. Malvina surrounded herself with books; and to Dr. Lowe, it appeared that she read them studiously. Never in his life had he known anybody who could converse readily with confidence on such a diverse range of topics. Though she was somewhat eccentric, her disposition was very sweet; she was very pretty as well. Be that as it may, he found her easily distractible and inclined to daydreaming. Additionally, she occasionally launched into a conversation that appeared to be directed towards somebody else in the room – the two were usually alone when this happened. Dr. Lowe, something of a recluse, pondered how the course of his life might turn if he were to marry the brilliant, but very strange widow. Needless to say, it was hard to imagine that he would grow tired of her company. Eventually, they began attending services at the Methodist Church; walking the few blocks together from her home on Rose Street at the old McAdams House. Their courtship was of the interminable variety, each willing but lacking the resolve to formalize an engagement. When Lowe became director of the hospital, his mind was consumed with his responsibilities. During this time, Malvina read ever medical text that she could find so they could maintain common ground in their conversations. Regardless, he did not allow himself to get closer to her; nor did she to him. There was a nightmarish past underpinning their awkward romance.

The demise of Klieneburger’s came suddenly when the railroads agreed to move their joint depot back to its original site within the business district. Without the daily stream of passengers into the neighborhood, business declined immediately. Now considered too out of the way with the discontinuation of the omnibus service, the workers from the rail yards became the establishment’s only patrons.

Helmut Klieneburger put his business on the market in 1880. After a year of disappointing offers, he sold the whole property to the county for half its value in cash and an obsolete brick building on the south side of the city. Though disillusioned by losing his beer garden, Klieneburger continued as a brew master at the new location. His lager beer continued to be a regional favorite. In fact, the brewery grew and prospered. Under the management of his son Wilhelm, the company continued to expand.

The former beer garden was called the County Hospital within days of its purchase - in name only. Dr. Lowe accepted the position of the director with some hesitation. While the title sounded grand, the salary was ridiculously low considering the level of responsibility. Furthermore, the entire facility had to be refitted and stocked for use as a hospital; staff needed to be hired; and new wells needed to be dug. The county board thought, as one might expect such bodies to think, that some physician of reputation might accept the position as a personal challenge. When the offer was declined by nearly all in the local medical community, the county turned to Dr. Greene and Dr. Lowe. Dr. Greene declined because of his age, but expressed a willingness to help in a lesser capacity. Dr. Lowe agreed to assume transforming the country estate turned beer garden into a community hospital, stating that he would continue in that position until a more suitable replacement was found.

December 3, 1881. The marriage ceremony for Colonel Joseph Wyche and Jane Littlefield was held on Saturday at noon in the Fourth Avenue Methodist Church. The charming Mrs. Malvina McAdams was in attendance, accompanied by Dr. Greene on one side and the lovely Mrs. Greene on the other. Her dress was of the sort befitting for a widow of the higher class. Her jewelry was modest and tasteful. A delicate hat rested on her graceful locks, and the pupils of her brown eyes gaze blissfully into the void. When anybody attempted to speak with her, Malvina nodded and smiled. Below the high collar of her dress, there was a full-length string of onyx beads wrapped close around her neck with the remaining length falling in a wide loop. Malvina fidgeted with the beads, rolling them between

the fingers of her right hand; and occasionally tugged the perturbing loop to reposition the clasp to its proper position.

She expected the distant cousin she grew up with to marry the Colonel years ago. Why Jane's father had objected to the union for so long was beyond her understanding. The Colonel was nearly the richest widower in the region. He might be a little older than she; but being thirty-six, Jane could overlook the difference. Since September of 1880, Jane had been living with Malvina in the McAdams House. This, perhaps, aided her campaign to win the Colonel. For the moment, however, Malvina's attention was drawn elsewhere: she was thinking about that delightful and unattached Dr. Lowe sitting in the next pew. Her thoughts drifted back to their first meeting at the Christmas Party. She had a glorious time walking with him in the garden listening to the brass band. It would be so enjoyable if he put aside his work for an evening and they could do something like that again. Dr. Lowe occasionally stole a glance at her. Malvina wanted to go to him, but Judith gripped her arm. Mrs. Greene was tall and had an athletic build; and her long fingers clamped down like a vise.

Now there came the familiar whisper into Malvina's ear – the imaginary friend, as the Colonel called her, returned. Her name was Susan.

"Malvina, if you put your hand on her softly, she will relax her grip." Malvina did as her "imaginary friend" Susan suggested, and it worked. Mrs. Greene smiled, lovingly. Susan whispered,

"Now, look closely at her face and I will tell you what she is thinking. Don't say anything! They will say you are talking to yourself again; but, you can talk to her." Malvina smiled at Mrs. Greene, then asked,

"What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, nothing important." In a sly tone, the voice of Susan interjected,

"Not so, Malvina; for a moment, right when you touched her hand, Mrs. Greene was remembering her own wedding. It was 1854, and the lovely lady was only twenty-three years old. Remember when

the she told us how she tricked the doctor into proposing to her – oh, he did not mind. But he was rather upset about being kept in the dark about Little Jack.” Under her breath, Malvina asked,

“How do you know?” Judith asked,

“Know what, dear?” Susan whispered,

“I told you not to speak! She told me all these things when we lived with her at the old Greene place. I do not know what you were doing at the time. Daydreaming again? Now say, ‘How do you know it isn’t important?’” Malvina asked Judith,

“How do you know it isn’t important?”

“Actually, it is; but only to me.” The voice of Susan laughed, then told Malvina,

“She has so many secrets.” Judith said,

“Malvina the service is about to begin.” The processional music called forth from the pipes of the organ as Jane entered the sanctuary. The voice of Susan was bemused. She whispered,

“Remember what happened to your husband.”

“What do you mean? Is this the future or the past?” Mrs. Greene put her fingers on her lips. In Malvina’s mind, Susan murmured,

“We will speak about that later. Be quiet and watch.”

February 6, 1882. A full week passed since Malvina sustained her injury. Finally, she had her own room inside the hospital. The main reason she was not moved from the makeshift operating room earlier was more the doing of Mr. Thomas than Dr. Lowe. The all-powerful attorney for the railroad and executor of the Wyche estate did not want one of his pet women “exposed to the ailments of the common crowd.” However, Dr. Lowe avoided moving her until a dry warm day. February gave him an abundance of clear, frigid days or warm wet days without intermission until the sixth. At around ten in the morning, Malvina was carefully moved to a newly finished room on the second floor at the hospital.

As things were, the journey from the operating room to the hospital was a welcomed outing. After having been confined to a bed for days and being required to rest in the dorsal position, Malvina was not only uncomfortable, she was restless beyond measure. It pleased her to have a window that gave her a view of the landscape rather than the sky. Around noon, Dr. Lowe stopped by to check on her. She immediately became cheerful and jested playfully, albeit still rather labored.

“Dr. Lowe, I’ve been meaning to tell you I do not think that a lady’s circle of friends should be privy to her inner workings. Nevertheless, I think we can forget about our awkward familiarity.”

“You must be feeling better?”

Malvina nodded and smiled. After gazing out the window for a moment, she closed her eyes and said,

“We first met here! Can you imagine? It was in this place so many years ago. There used to be beautiful gardens out front, and this was the grand hotel. I can see it!” Her nurse Lavinia asked,

“What do you see?”

“The Christmas Party; it was a glorious affair, and I remember everything about it! Everything, including the banquet! Let me refresh your memory so you can enjoy it with me again.” Then, she looked at the wall and in labored voice, read through the dinner menu for the Christmas Party at Klieneburger’s Beer Garden without the slightest omission – including the faint watermark of the paper on which it was printed! Having briefly checked her citations from medical texts she had given him the day she was injured and finding them accurate, he was doubly amazed at her recitation of the banquet menu. She looked at him and asked,

“Why did you change it into this?”

“You might not have noticed, Malvina; our lawn is not grass, but was mistakenly sown in winter wheat. Where our groundskeeper Mr. Bacon did not mow, you can see stalks of wheat.” Malvina jested,

“Sir, you should not have mowed it down. Food should not be wasted!” He returned her jest.

“You have to work with what you have.”

“Why haven’t Jane and my father come to visit?”

Dr. Lowe had anticipated she would ask this question eventually, but it did not relieve the uneasiness he felt when she asked. He replied,

“Your sister is eager to see you now that we have moved you into the hospital. You should be able to receive visitors soon, maybe momentarily.” Lavinia, deliberately distracting Malvina, said,

“If I may ask you something, Mrs. McAdams, how do you remember all these things about something that happened long ago?”

“It is like a photograph. I remember everything on paper forever, and keep track of it with a mental catalogue as with a library. It is very important to shelve books in order. Don’t you agree, Dr. Lowe?”

“Quite remarkable, isn’t she; I have read of others who have this gift.”

“Do you want to know their names?” Dr. Lowe laughed and said,

“Isn’t she the clever one? No, not now Malvina; I have work to do.”

When Dr. Greene checked on Malvina later that day, she was sitting up in bed listening to Lavinia explain why Jane and Mr. Thomas wanted her to stay in the hospital a little longer. Malvina listened intently and smiled graciously. Dr. Greene, grumbling under his breath, said,

“Since when did Mr. Thomas assumed the directorship of this hospital?” Lavinia surprised, said,

“Oh, Dr. Greene; her sister was by about an hour ago to help her dress and fix her hair. Doesn’t she look so nice today? Dr. Lowe said she could sit up for a change.”

“Malvina turned her head and smiled at Dr. Greene.” He asked,

“To whom am I speaking to this morning, Malvina or her friend?” A look of concern suddenly crossed Malvina’s face.

“Sir, it is Malvina you are speaking with, and it will remain that way. The person you call my ‘friend’ is nothing more than a character I invented for my stories. You are entirely mistaken if you think that I believe her to be real.” Dr. Greene asked,

“Is the sky dark?”

“It most certainly is not, sir!”

“Tell me the day of the week, the month, the year, and the season.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Today is April 15, 1864, and it is a lovely spring day.”

“Malvina became somewhat irritated. Surely you are playing with me, sir! There is not a single blossom and green leaf to be seen and it is entirely too cold. Not more than a few weeks ago, father took me to Christmas services, and Reverend Sics gave a wonderful sermon about ‘in this time of peace and joy, we should not forget the war widows and orphans.’ I spied you napping, so it is unlikely you remember; even so, you were definitely listening when your wife sang a solo with the choir – she has the most beautiful voice. During the service, she dropped her spectacles three times and was fidgety. It was overcast that day, but not cold like today. After a wonderful dinner with my father and Jane, they gave me a delicate gold timepiece I could pin on my dress like a brooch. Engraved on the case, it said, ‘Our beautiful Malvina – Christmas 1881.’ If Jane remembers to fetch it from my dresser, you can see it for yourself, sir.”

“You have a remarkable memory, Mrs. McAdams, to be sure. Now, why not tell me what happened to you the night you were

injured? Before the men from the railroad took up their search, was somebody trying to hurt you?”

Malvina paused for a moment. Her confidence collapsed. With a worried and imploring expression, she took Dr. Greene’s hand and looked directly in his eyes.

“The soldiers came into my house looking for plunder after my husband died. They tried to frighten me into telling them where he hid the treasure, but I did not know. They plundered the house from top to bottom, but found nothing. They became very angry and hurt me. Finally, one of the soldiers said, ‘She is no use to us. We ought to kill her,’ but they decided to teach me a lesson instead – something to think about that would prevent me from talking. They said they would be back some day!”

In dismay, Lavinia looked at the doctor. He returned her look with the same expression. They could read the look of terror upon Malvina’s face. Dr. Greene asked,

“And did they come back the other day?”

“I can’t say how I ended up asleep, but it is almost a sure thing I was thrown onto my bed willy-nilly, all catty-cornered with my feet off the bed. Except for my shoes, I was dressed. The bed was still made. My head hurt terribly! It was the sound of somebody rummaging through the kitchen downstairs that startled me awake. Nobody was in the house except for me, so I had to get away! They came back to get me for sure, sir!”

Malvina paused briefly to dab her eyes and clear her throat – all a visible effort to constrain her emotions.

“I did not tarry long in the house for the sake of confirming my suspicions! I slipped out the back door and down to the path that runs above the tracks to the old depot with six twenty-dollar gold pieces in my coat pocket – the same you found wrapped up in the lace edged handkerchief. I wanted to go to Oak Crossroads. That’s where we were safe before. The postmaster and his wife took care

of us. Then, all these men came running after me from every which way!”

“Tell us, Mrs. McAdams, these soldiers that hurt you before... Do you know their names?”

“Oh, for certain, they were renegades and bummers, and they were bad ones, to say the least! Their captain was a gentleman, at least in his manner of speech, not his actions; perhaps his men would have killed me if he were a lesser sort. Still, he was quite evil in his genteel way. The Captain was familiar with my husband during the war, but died recently – a relative, no less! It was William Grundy Littlefield!” Lavinia, shocked, asked,

“You don’t mean Senator Littlefield?”

“He was a true ‘Willard’, through and through! The Captain was here to look at the hospital when Dr. Lowe took me to see the work. He introduced himself, took my hand, and felt my fear! I was cold and shaking; and in his eyes, the look told me that he knew that I recognized him.”

“Did you tell Dr. Lowe about this?”

“No! He would think Susan had lost her mind!”

Dr. Greene had heard this story before from Colonel Wyche nearly ten years earlier, but this was the first time he had heard it from Malvina. The word “plunder” was a part of the narrative that was new to him. Wyche had told him that common burglars had broken into her house on the evening after her housekeeper left. He asked,

“Where was your friend during all of this?” Malvina, without thinking, answered,

“Oh, she was hiding!” Lavinia gasped.

“That is pure meanness, Dr. Greene! You are every bit the trickster as your beloved wife. Yes, if I was a true student of her ways, then no rascal would get the better of me again! Never mind you, Dr. Greene! I will write my story down for all; and everybody will know

that she isn't anything more than imagination!" Dr. Greene took her hand and said,

"Calm down, Mrs. McAdams. It was wrong of me to ask. Would you like tea? Malvina, sniffing, answered,

"Yes... I would like some cookies, too. Could I have cookies?" Dr. Greene smiled and asked,

"Butter cookies?" Malvina replied with childlike anticipation,

"Yes, tea and butter cookies!"

"I will send for your refreshments." Dr. Greene took Lavinia aside and whispered,

"That is Malvina!"

February 8, 1882. The events surrounding the night Colonel Wyche was murdered baffled Dr. Lovejoy. The city police report tacitly mentioned the search for Malvina in the cemetery. It was almost entirely the eyewitness reports of the railroad men concerning the ambush of her father, and the gunfight that followed. Lovejoy was determined to search for clues about what occurred prior to the crime. He decided then to invite Mr. Cassidy along on his walk through the cemetery. Mr. Cassidy accepted the invitation, although his gunshot wound was giving him considerable pain. He could hardly move his arm without intense discomfort. Yet, he braved the cold February air with nonchalance, though it seemed to add to his aches. Lovejoy asked,

"It appears that you were in the exact place at the precise time the other night, Mr. Cassidy. I've been wondering why. I don't suppose you could satisfy my curiosity on that point?"

"I've included everything in my report, sir. During the last few weeks, I was assigned to several cases. The first was that of the child's coffin found under the Fourth Avenue Bridge."

"That was under the jurisdiction of the city police. Why were you put on the case? My report stated that there was no evidence to suggest that there was ever a body in that coffin."

“The coffin was found on railroad property, Dr. Lovejoy. Mr. Thomas put me on the case.”

“That is not the only reason.”

“You will have to ask him, sir; he acted on Colonel Wyche’s orders. Still, if this is a case of grave robbing, which I think it is – and you think it is – the cemetery is six hundred and sixty feet outside the city limits. It is in the county jurisdiction. Why Colonel Wyche suspected it came from here, I could not say for sure.”

“Then give me an educated guess, Mr. Cassidy.”

“I think you know the answer to that; particularly, since your niece came to the same conclusion. Malvina McAdams, or Jane Wyche, or both, buried that coffin under the bridge. There is insufficient evidence to charge either with a crime – at least, not yet. On the other hand, there is more to it than the disposal of an empty coffin. There was something in it and it wasn’t a body.”

“Really; do you suppose Judith Greene could tell us?”

“I suppose she could; I doubt she would.”

“Then we have Colonel Wyche...”

“Yes, Dr. Lovejoy. If his daughter and his wife were entangled in this affair, you might expect as much.”

“So, what do you really know, Mr. Cassidy?”

“The day after the senator was murdered; Mrs. Greene rushed out to meet the Colonel’s train. She checked with Mr. Rouse about when he would return from New York. They had a long conversation out in the freezing cold. Unusual! The Colonel made up a special train that included his private car. Before I go over the particulars of what happen next, let me tell you about somebody who was following Mrs. Greene that day. It was a lady, a stealthy one; all bundled up for the cold.”

“Was she at the depot?”

“You know how the locomotives are always venting clouds of metallic smelling steam after they back the cars into the train shed.

Well, this lady made her way between the trains, crossed the track in front of the engine, and ducked down between the wheels and the platform in the steam, so she could spy on the Colonel and Mrs. Greene. Now, that is about as reckless as you can get! If that locomotive started moving, and a snag caught her coat, she would be pulled right under the wheels.”

“Did you get a good look at her?”

“By my estimate, she was average size with dark hair. From the part of her face that wasn’t covered by her scarf, I would say she was about thirty... maybe twenty-five or thereabouts.”

“Did you follow her?”

“I sure did, sir. After Mrs. Greene and the Colonel when inside, ‘Missy’ made her way out to the place where the omnibus picks up passengers. She met a fellow; the one you just planted in the potter’s field.”

“That’s promising. Where did they go after that?”

“She returned to the depot. I followed the man until dark. Somewhere out on River Street near the north wharves, I lost him. The next time, he just gunned down the Colonel.”

“Who were you following at the time?”

“Mrs. Wyche.”

“What about this special train, Mr. Cassidy?”

“A fellow in the yards told me, Colonel Wyche sent Mr. Rouse to the McAdams House to get his daughter. It took over an hour. Mrs. Greene remained in the depot. She did not have anything more than the clothes on her back when the Colonel sent the train off to God knows where. Mrs. McAdams had a trunk. It was all rather strange.”

“Yes, it seems to be.”

“I have to hand it to you, sir. Letting your niece work with you is awfully bold. There is a lot of talk about it in town.”

“It does not matter, Mr. Cassidy.” Dr. Lovejoy stopped at a patch of ground that was scorched. “This is where Malvina McAdams threw down the lantern she had snatched from the caretaker of the cemetery. What do you think of this?”

“Obviously, she threw the lantern from the top of the hill. It hit the ground and the oil splashed out in one direction, and then flamed up. Look at all those footprints! Deep ones, at that! It looks like five or six men stomped it out. We had some rain after that night. Not enough to wash the footprints away. There are bits of broken glass here, too. Does that mean anything to you?” Dr. Lovejoy picked up a piece of broken glass, examined it closely, sniffed it, then dropped it saying,

“The Greene plot is at the top of that rise. Let’s take a look up there? I’ll wager you a silver dollar that we’ll find something.”

“Sir, I know better than to make bets with you.” Upon reaching the top of the hill, Dr. Lovejoy immediately spotted something.

“You see that, Cassidy? Right there on that patch of earth.”

“It looks like an animal was digging.”

“No, that was a person digging... with their hands...” Dr. Lovejoy closely examined the hole. “Can you see, Cassidy? ... Fingers clawing the earth; handfuls thrown aside and clumps of dead grass. Look at this ever so slight slope. That angled depression here... It looks like a grave to me.”

“There is no headstone.”

“There is a grave here, Mr. Cassidy; I can tell.”

“Maybe, it wasn’t used. They filled it in. Perhaps, the coffin was moved to another grave.”

“We need to check the burial records.”

“That is your line of work, sir. I’m looking for something else.

“And what is that, Mr. Cassidy?”

“What do you think is in this crypt?” Lovejoy shook his head and said,

“Nothing; Mrs. Greene had that made during the war. All the same, it would make for a nice hiding place while unoccupied.”

“Yes, I agree. We know where the coffin is; but what do you suppose was in that coffin?”

“Gold, maybe; my niece thinks so. What about you?”

“Not gold; maybe, bank notes... or incriminating documents from the war; I think what was meant to be hidden here is somewhere else. Mrs. Greene wanted somebody – like Fred McAdams and his associates – to think it was buried in this graveyard.”

“So, Mr. Cassidy, we have a unique child’s coffin made by a cabinetmaker in Raleigh, a receipt that indicates it was purchased by Mrs. Greene, and it shows up under the Fourth Avenue Bridge. She admitted to purchasing it, but her reasons for obtaining it cannot be substantiated. Furthermore, she knows nothing of how it suddenly appeared after seventeen years. From the absence of residue from remains, obviously it never held a body; and from the condition of the wood, I can tell it was exposed to dampness, and dried in a warm place free of moisture. There exists no evidence to place it here, nor can we assume it contained anything. That is what we have. Despite all, Judge Coats, Senator Littlefield, and Fred McAdams – all childhood friends of Judith Greene – spied during the war. All of them died in unusual ways, and it appears that Mrs. Greene is in danger. So too is Malvina McAdams – she lived with Mrs. Greene during the war. Finally, as you well know, Malvina’s father was murdered outside the hospital – he had a common bond with all of them. For me, it appears that somebody is trying to get rid of witnesses, evidence, or both.” Cassidy shook his head and said,

“Sir, from the beginning, I have suspected that Jane Wyche was at the bottom of this. Unfortunately, it is merely my intuition.”

CHAPTER TWO

January 29, 1882. The staff of County Hospital was on the verge of being overwhelmed. Earlier that evening, Malvina was brought into the hospital with broken ribs and likely a punctured lung. She sustained her injuries in the nearby County Cemetery while trying to flee a group of men searching for her. Colonel Wyche, running from the Old Union Depot to his daughter's side, was gunned down by an assassin not far from the hospital. The murderer was killed during an exchange of gunfire with Marcus Cassidy. The detective was injured slightly. Dr. Lowe and young Dr. John Wilson were the only doctors at the hospital that evening, but Dr. Greene was on his way from home. Jane Littlefield Wyche, originally at the hospital because of Malvina was shattered when she learned that her husband was slain. For Jane, Malvina had always stood in the way of her happiness and bound her to the role of the dutiful companion – a role she would not relinquish even when her wish for happiness had been granted. During the short duration of her marriage, her daytime hours were spent attending to every need of her cousin rather than enjoying the cheerful atmosphere within the home her husband provided for her.

Jane was seated in a simple wooden chair in the entrance hall of the hospital, with one hand resting upon the arm of a policeman, and the other being stroked by the nurse on one knee at her feet. She constrained the impulse to cry aloud, but tears trickled down her face even so. Dr. Wilson offered her a glass of whiskey, but she declined with a slight shake of her head. Upon the confirmation of the death of Colonel Wyche, Dr. Wilson and the groundskeeper Mr. Bacon moved his body into the parlor of the mansion turned hospital. As of yet, there was no specific place set aside for the dead; the old parlor stripped down to the floor for renovation had to do for the time being. No sooner had they placed his body in peaceful repose upon a simple wooden table, Jane appeared at the doorway and asked Dr. Wilson,

“He is dead isn’t he?” Gazing down at his body without looking up, she continued, “Did he suffer long?” He answered uneasily,

“I don’t think so Mrs. Wyche. The men who brought him said he dropped in an instant. With all their efforts, they could not revive him. Madam, I am confident he felt little pain. The first shot was to the head.” Jane slowly walked across the room and bent down over the table without diverting her gaze from the Colonel. Taking her husband’s hand, she remarked with a fleeting hint of hope.

“He is still warm!” Dr. Wilson replied nervously,

“It will be that way for a while Mrs. Wyche. Would you like to sit with him? I’ve sent for the coroner, but it will be a long time before he arrives. We will leave you in peace until then.” Jane murmured,

“Please do. It will be a long time without him.” Mr. Bacon remarked timidly,

“We are sorry about your loss. Though I didn’t know him, from what everybody said, I believe he was a decent man. Yes, very excellent from all I’ve heard.”

“He would have been happy to hear that. If he were a little less good, I would be leaning over Malvina.” After leaving the room, Dr. Wilson sent Mr. Bacon out on horseback to fetch Dr. Greene.

With the help of the nurses, Dr. Lowe placed Malvina on the operating table. It was not entirely comfortable, but it was the only furnishing in the room where she could recline. It was the handiwork of a local cabinetmaker. He was given a drawing of an operating table and asked to build one from the dismantled remains of some of the ornate woodwork of the mansion. The resulting apparatus was a cross between a richly polished dining room table and a *chaise longue*.

After a slight, gentle natured nurse named Elizabeth lifted Malvina’s chemise on the left side to expose her injury, Dr. Lowe could see the displacement of the broken rib. Listening to her chest, he noticed *vocal fremitus*, a sound often described as walking on snow. It occurs when there is fluid in the pleural cavity. Likely there was profuse hemorrhaging. Malvina remained still during the

examination even though it was obvious she was in intense pain and her respiratory distress was increasing. After sanitizing his hands in a carbolic acid solution – then, a procedure considered radical, Dr. Lowe prepared a catheter with a large gauge needle and inserted it into her side to draw out air and fluid to arrest the collapse of the lung. Air started to audibly vent through the tube. Her breathing gradually became less labored. After a while, a frothy mixture of air and blood-tinged fluid emptied from her chest. The doctor bought time to worry. Lavinia, the other nurse on duty sat on a chair beside Malvina and held the tube, allowing the fluid to drain into a glass jar. She could see the eyes of her patient follow every movement of Dr. Lowe and Elizabeth. It seemed like she wanted to say something from time to time, but only coughed. With that wonderful mind, Malvina had been removing herself from the moment as the level of her distress intensified. Distantly, she realized the injury was serious when Dr. Lowe inserted the needle and her gaze turned to the tube, then the jar collecting the fluid. Finally, she reached out with her right hand to Lavinia. The nurse said comfortingly,

“It will be all right.” Dr. Lowe said,

“Elizabeth, could you go check outside? I would like to know the disposition of the detective. When I saw Dr. Wilson last, he said the men from the railroad told him that the fellow had been shot in the arm. I would like to know whether they brought him up. When you find out, come right back here as quickly as you can.”

“Yes, sir; I’ll hurry back!” Lavinia interjected,

“Sir, I think you are upsetting her!”

“Malvina, you are safe here.” Malvina struggled to speak,

“Dr. Lowe... it’s the Yankees, isn’t it?”

“There are no Yankees out there, Malvina.”

“I heard shooting!”

“It wasn’t the Yankees. Please calm down.”

By the time Dr. Greene had arrived in his buggy, Malvina was in serious distress. He had little time to contemplate the loss of his close friend Colonel Wyche. Upon stepping down from his buggy, a shivering nurse named Iris who volunteered to stand lookout for his arrival in the drive ushered him to the operating room. Mr. Bacon unhitched the horse from the buggy and took it to the stable. He returned to take his station on the steps to the hospital awaiting further instructions, assuming the stance of a sentry. On seeing Mr. Bacon waiting in the cold, Iris invited the old soldier inside to warm himself by the fireplace. After a slight hesitation, he accepted the offer. Iris said,

“The risk of catching something from the sick inside or from the frigid air without is about the same. Take a seat in a comfortable chair in front of the fire and I’ll bring you some coffee. The doctors know where to find you when you are needed.”

“I appreciate it, Miss Iris. I won’t trouble you for long.”

“It is no trouble, Mr. Bacon. You have worked hard this evening; I expect it is not over. Dr. Wilson is working on the man that was shot through the arm.”

“He’s a brave fellow, I tell you what.”

“Yes, he is! The policeman said the man he shot was the scoundrel who murdered Senator Littlefield.”

“My goodness; he was out to kill all the big men in town!”

“Help came too late for the Colonel. Somebody ought to be with his wife; I must check on her. Warm yourself Mr. Bacon I’m sure there will be more to do momentarily.”

After some time had passed, Dr. Wilson asked Mr. Bacon to move a disassembled bed over to the operating room. Dutifully, he carried the pieces of the bed across the walk in several trips, and placed them beside the door. After finishing, Dr. Wilson invited him into the kitchen to share a thrown together meal of coffee, boiled eggs, cold cornbread, and jam. Returning to his chair by the fireplace

in the entrance hall, he drifted off to sleep before midnight. A nurse on the first floor later provided him with a blanket.

Malvina fractured the left seventh rib – the last of the true ribs on that side – on the line following the natural fall of the arm; and the eighth rib sustained a clean break. The violent force of impact with the tombstone appeared to have been concentrated on the rib, which broke transversely and tore through the pleura and slightly penetrated the lung. While the depth of the laceration to the lung was not that great, it permitted blood and air to enter the pleural cavity. *Hæmo-thorax* occurs from a wound to the pleura or lung where bleeding inhibits respiration; and *pneumo-thorax* results from a wound to the lung that introduces air into the pleural cavity. In both instances, the lung can collapse.

County Hospital was a work in progress and hardly prepared to do anything more than take in the overflow from the old Government Hospital that had served the town since Reconstruction. The building was not designed as a hospital. While its principal physicians had served as battlefield surgeons, performing delicate procedures in a converted billiards room with an improvised skylight would be something new. For the moment, the doctors tried to relieve Malvina's most immediate distress; they hoped to move her to a better-equipped facility the next day. When Dr. Greene arrived in the operating room, Dr. Lowe whispered to him,

"Mrs. Wyche told us she had a fever. She has no fever now, nor has she had one any time recently." Whispering, Dr. Greene replied,

"She conveniently confuses being afraid with a fever. Do not believe it for one minute, my friend. Look at her! Malvina would still be giving all those fellows a good run until morning had she not injured herself. See, even with the pain, she is trying to give us that 'cat that ate the bird' smile. You know firsthand what's going on with her. How long has it been since they brought her in?"

"She has been here at least an hour, and perhaps it took a while getting her to the hospital. I think *hæmo-thorax* – possibly from a

shard of rib bone. The bleeding seems slow, but steady.” Lavinia noticed that Malvina was unusually calm. The patient’s hand had become relaxed in her own. She also saw it in the patient’s face. It was an unusual calm: almost as from a distance. Dr. Greene mumbled a few choice maledictions and grumbled,

“She’s fighting the pain.” Turning to Malvina, he said in a calm tone,

“Mrs. McAdams, am I talking to Malvina or the friend?” Malvina responded with a somewhat pained smile,

“The friend...”

“That’s what I thought. Malvina has made a mess of herself and we need to fix her.” She replied in a faint breathless tone,

“Can I watch?”

“No; you must rest and let us worry about that. Just stay still and behave yourself. Stop trying to talk; it isn’t helping.”

Pulling Dr. Lowe aside, Dr. Greene reminded him that nobody needed to tell Malvina about the death of her father anytime soon. Jane had to tell her eventually, but he hoped she would wait. Elizabeth and Lavinia were puzzled by this brief exchange. Then much to their surprise, Malvina said in a subdued, calm, labored, but confident voice that it was her opinion based upon her own “detailed observations” that the lung – rather than my lung – was punctured by the splintered edge of the broken rib and nothing was embedded in the lung. However, the rib she thought was likely more damaged than it appeared from the outside. Believing that the entire portion of the bloody fluid drained from her had originated with injury to the pleura, she did not think a lung puncture caused perfused bleeding. Concluding in a whispery voice, she stated that the doctors used unorthodox methods. Greene tersely retorted,

“You read too much, friend of Malvina. I know all about you.”

After a moment, she made a gesture to Lowe indicating she wanted to whisper something in his ear. The doctor bent down to listen. She whispered in a slow, labored way the titles and page

numbers of several medical texts that he had given her where the topic was addressed, then concluded with “I love you.” After that, she’d had enough of trying to communicate. Lowe scribbled on a piece of paper what she had told him; this pleased her. Dr. Greene glanced at the note and said,

“Clever little thing, isn’t she?” Dr. Lowe replied,

“Considering the circumstances, she is acting rather calm... much like herself.”

“That’s the friend, Jacob! We can’t think about that now. Let’s get her ready.”

Dr. Greene discovered that Malvina was correct about not having a fragment in her lung, but he had to apply ligatures and the *haemostatic* ergotine to arrest the persistent bleeding of the several lacerations on the lung aside from the puncture. There was a slash in the pleura cause by the breaking of the rib, and embedded shattered fragments that needed to be removed. The catheter had to remain until all the fluid had drained. The treatment of the fractured and broken ribs was undertaken by Lowe in the usual fashion: strips of cotton gauze of a three-inch width were impregnated with plaster and wrapped overlapping from sternum to backbone beginning under the left breast with the arm extended at a right angle to the line with the body; the overlapping plaster strips continued down below the length of the ribcage; a sling had to support the arm in the required position; and last, a body roller was applied over the strapping. After the surgery, the bed that Mr. Bacon had delivered was assembled in the operating room and Malvina was moved from the hard surface of the table. Since the room did not connect directly to the rest of the hospital, the doctors did not want to move her out into the cold air. The nurses Elizabeth and Lavinia attentively remained with Malvina.

Nobody knows how long Jane Wyche remained with the corpse as more pressing issues commanded the staff’s complete attention. Sometime around one in the morning, her watch over the late Colonel Wyche was abandoned. She walked home with her head in

her hands, attended by no well-wishing friend. After patching up Mr. Cassidy's arm, Dr. Wilson briefly walked down to the road where the police had gathered around the body of Colonel Wyche's murderer. Cassidy followed the doctor back to the body even though he was advised to stay put. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Lovejoy arrived with his wagon. Jane walked past the spectacle, but nobody noticed. Dr. Lovejoy asked,

"They told me this fellow shot Colonel Wyche. Where did you put him?"

"He is in the old parlor."

"John, I'll take this one first. It will probably be around three o'clock before I pick up the Colonel."

"His wife is with him." Dr. Lovejoy asked,

"Did you record the time of death; what about this fellow?"

"Yes, both of them; I ran down here after the Colonel passed away. This one was dead – maybe before he hit the ground. I have the paperwork for you."

"It has been an awful frightful week, my boy..."

"I know ... we're shorthanded so I have to get back. The Colonel's daughter has been injured, too!" Surprised, Dr. Lovejoy asked,

"Was she shot?"

"No. From what I gather, somebody was after her. She tried to lose him in the cemetery, and that is where she ran into a tombstone and broke her ribs. The Colonel had all the men from the upper yards look for her. Mrs. Wyche had a different story."

"What's that, John?"

"Mrs. McAdams was suffering delirium from a fever, she said."

"I see. You had better run on back to the hospital and take care of the living. Oh, one more thing, is Dr. Greene up there?"

“He is treating Mrs. McAdams. Should I tell him something?”

“No, just asking. He lost his best friend today, son. You better get on back.”

“Oh, Dr. Lovejoy, see that gentleman talking to the police captain? His name is Mr. Cassidy. He shot the killer!”

“He did a good job of it, too. Damn shame, John! I wish we had the killer alive. We have too many loose ends. I’ll see you in a while.”

The news of the Colonel’s death was not officially transmitted to the *Messenger* until the body had been removed from the hospital grounds and his wife had been notified by the police. The newspaper received confirmation at around five that morning. A full-page story, though, was published in the evening edition. The railroad had its hand in the whole of the story printed and most of it was the truth. Like Senator Littlefield, he was assassinated. Gilridge was shaken to its foundation.

March 3, 1882. Louisa was not her real name, but she played her role long enough to become comfortable with it. Her singular objective was protecting the interest of the *Kinsfolke*. She was one of them, the daughter of the man who devised the plan to steal the bonds and the first woman “executioner” of their society. On her return to Gilridge, she arrived on a decrepit side-wheeler called *Rice King*. The name was a legacy from antebellum days when the chief crop of the lower river was rice. After the war, it carried lumber and coal from inland to Gilridge. There were usually about a dozen passengers for each trip. The gentleman accompanying the woman replaced the assassin killed by Cassidy. The two were traveling under the guise of Gaston Calder and his wife Louisa. True to their roles, they referred to themselves as such even when they knew they could not be overheard. Louisa described the vulnerabilities of the north dock area of the port to her new associate. This was the area where she and the deceased killer had hidden when they committed the earlier murders. Louisa told Gaston,

"This is called the Northside docks. The cotton compress and the three turpentine distilleries occupy this entire section of River Street. It starts at Commerce in the center of town and continues to the wharves of the Central Railroad at the extreme north end." Gaston replied,

"I presume this attorney, Mr. Thomas, has his office in the railroad administration building?"

"Yes, and it is entirely too difficult to get to him. He hired private detectives to follow him everywhere. The man is guarded like an emperor, and I can see no vulnerability in his armor."

"What about the other?"

"A railroad detective named Marcus Cassidy... He shot your predecessor. Very charming this fellow, but he is a snake who could deliver a deadly strike in an instant. He is inclined to further his own interest when the opportunity presents itself. As of late, he has been eyeing the widow of the deceased superintendent of the railroad. She is something of a prize because her husband left her a fortune."

"That might be vulnerability."

"Perhaps, she is the foil for Cassidy; not Mr. Thomas. Jane Wyche is unprotected. I am inclined to think that he is using her as bait."

"For whom?"

"Us, I presume. Her husband once had the documents address to LeQuire that I spoke about earlier. Yet, I doubt his widow knows anything about them. Even if they were in her possession, their text would be meaningless. The lady is more incline to entertaining whims than comprehending the subtleties of finance. I know her personally and can vouch for the accuracy of that assessment."

"What about the other woman?"

"She has disappeared."

"Louisa, this is a very difficult situation. I cannot do this for a thousand dollars."

“I am prepared to offer you double.”

“That is quite a generous offer, but how do you propose it should be done – certainly, not in the usual fashion?” Looking out over the waterfront, he waited for her answer. After a long silence, she said,

“My father owns several properties on the docks, including the old saw mill on the Southside. It has been idle since the end of the war, but I intend to restart it. You will assume management of the mill and present yourself as a businessman of the town. Do not worry about the actual operations. I will see that all is set in motion. Merely, act as a figurehead.”

“For how long?”

“Until Mr. Thomas is convinced that the danger is past. This time, we will forgo your predecessor’s flair for the dramatic. His death must appear natural.”

“During this masquerade, I assume that I will receive remuneration? It might take months.”

“Why, of course. You will receive a salary commiserate with your position and a share from the profits. There is a considerable amount of money to be had in this business. I have several thousand acres of trees, eager for the ax when the mill is ready to put into operation.”

“My word! That seems like an attractive offer. It has been some time since I ran a business of the respectable variety. What if I take a liking to it after our principal work is completed?”

“The business does not end with the untimely demise of Mr. Thomas. I must have those documents in hand along with the bonds. My patrons stand to lose if we fail to secure them; this damning property has broken free of its anchor and came to surface here. Had the scheme not been so ill-timed, all would have remained in the abyss of long past days. That is, if a certain lady whom I know well had not presented for our entertainment an enthralling tale about an intrepid group of soldiers and a fearless lady. Additionally, there was a traitor.”

“I see, but the fear of death is not much of an incentive. It was a familiar companion during the war and I learned to cheat it. What more can you offer?”

“Providing you set this matter to rest for all time, I will offer you my hand in marriage with all the wealth that can be obtained through our enterprise. Since I have tainted myself with murder, it would be irksome to maintain my secret from a husband of high principals. We would get along well if you behave accordingly. By your speech and actions, I assume you are a gentleman from a proper family before *Our Late Misfortune*.”

“Yes. They fancy my occasional absence as legitimate business. You will find the name to your liking. Nevertheless, the war left us with a pecuniary embarrassment that has yet to be resolved. Alas, my brothers have not broken its grip, even though their exertions have been remarkably productive.”

“Like your predecessor, you come highly recommended.”

“There is one thing I will not do for you. I will not kill a woman.”

“That is comforting to know, Gaston. I cannot say the same. There are a few that I would do away with, if I were certain not to be killed trying.”

“I will provide you with sufficient instruction, my dear Louisa.”

February 3, 1882. Malvina rested on the bed moved to the operating room the night she was brought to the hospital. On the insistence of the attorney for the railroad, Mr. Thomas, she remained apart from the other patients. Moreover, Dr. Lowe was reluctant to move her due to the cold and rainy weather. Malvina was attended by Elizabeth, the young nurse who kept watch over her during the evening.

“Are you warm enough, dear?”

Malvina was excited by the thunderstorm that rolled in before dark. She looked up from her bed in the operating room at the glass skylight: illuminated by flashes of lightning, the streams of raindrops

rolled off the large, angled panes of glass of this curious structure. Never had she seen or imagined anything like it. She asked,

“Why would anybody want a roof of glass?”

“It helps the doctors see what they are doing when they operate. There is a slight draft in this room.” Elizabeth stoked the potbelly stove. Malvina heard familiar whispering in her ear. Susan returned for a visit.

“Malvina, we should ask Mr. Thomas to have you moved to more cheerful quarters, don’t you think?”

“Oh yes!” Assuming Malvina was speaking to her, Elizabeth said,

“I’ll put in more coal.” The voice of Susan admonished her.

“I told you not to do that, Malvina! For the time being, why not visit with me? We can go somewhere else... some place nice.”

Malvina immediately diverted her attention from the glass skylight, withdrawing to an inner place she and Susan called the library. When the two sides of Malvina met in conference, it happened in this serene setting. Both personae could passively observe what was happening in the world surrounding the body, but their engagements with external sensations and actions were limited to the point where an outside observer could easily mistake Malvina as imbecilic. The traumatic events of her childhood – particularly, the death of her mother – erected this defense against the assault of the world. If all failed, Malvina would never be without a companion and helper.

On this occasion, Malvina’s imaginings of Susan were magnificent! Dressed in evening attire of emerald satin and bedecked with jewels, Malvina was somewhat dazzled by her visage. Susan took her hands and kissed her cheek, much in the way a mother greets a child. Free of her damaged body, Malvina eagerly embraced her friend. If there was an observer in the library, the two women would appear to be twins all but their dress: Malvina in her simple white day dress would have made her appear to be the untouched portion of blank canvas where the artist intended to paint a lady. Another irony

that would strike an imaginary observer was that Susan though in her ways more mature minded and womanly, appeared youthful and witty whereas her innocent twin seemed much older. The “friend” as Dr. Greene called her, was not a make-believe interloper or an affectionate phantom; she was part of Malvina. Both could be one remarkable human being, gifted far beyond abundance with intelligence and grace; regrettably, circumstances kept them divided from the beginning. Though without knowing it, Dr. Lowe witnessed brief moments when both joined into the whole person. Susan had a vision for herself and it was not any different than the person Malvina longed to be.

“Dear, I must ask you something. There are papers here from many years ago – the ones that Mrs. Greene told you to memorize. Do you recall where they are shelved?”

“Susan, I know where all the books are and can find any passage in them in an instant, even though many are not proper reading for a lady. Remember what the headmistress said when we were in school?” She smiled at Malvina then turned her back while continuing to converse.

“Enough of that; it no longer matters. If you recall, it was I who suffered the consequences when curiosity got the better of you. And who but I had to study the ways of the world when you blundered into the company of gentlemen. Do not lecture me on what I should read, particularly since you collected all these books.” Malvina was both hurt and embarrassed by this remark, but kept silent. “Now, I heard Dr. Greene refer to me as ‘the friend.’ You should not tell others about us. Do you understand, dear? I cannot say that often enough. We are in danger!”

“Why do they want to hurt us?”

“This is your husband’s fault.”

“Mr. McAdams was our husband, Susan!”

"You married him against my will. I warned you he would be trouble. He was merely using you like he used Mrs. Greene... and Mrs. Greene used you."

"How did she use me?"

"She used you for your gift. I told you not to look at that document." Malvina protested.

"I could not understand it."

"No, but you shelved it away in your memory!"

"Is that what they want?"

"Maybe, but I think we need to understand it first. It must be very important; Mrs. Greene did not bury it with the bonds. Remember what she said, Malvina?"

"She thought it told everything about the bonds."

"Somebody wants to get their hands on it. If they can't, they are going to murder everyone, including Mrs. Greene and Jane... maybe, others we don't know about. When they find out that you have it here, in your pretty little head, we are doomed."

"What can we do?"

"We agreed that anything between us will be written down as a story so our family and the rest will think us clever and entertaining, not lunatics. That is the only way to get them to listen to all we have witnessed and the secrets we know. I am afraid you have ruined the illusion I so carefully devised to keep those people listening to us."

"I didn't mean to do that, Susan! I told Jane, and Jane told Father, and Father told the doctor, and..."

"And he asked me! What was I to do? He knew that I was not feeling the pain as much as you, so all I could do is give him your vacuous smile. Dr. Greene knew better."

"What about Dr. Lowe?"

"Yes; Dr. Lowe! I am angry that you ruined it for me. I am in love with him; and surely, he was falling in love with me. I never

cared one bit for your Fred McAdams, but you forced him on me! Why couldn't you stay here with the books where you are pleased? You're not happy out there!"

"That is cruel of you, Susan! I would never deliberately hurt you or try to take away your happiness! It was you! You saw him didn't you? That man!"

"Yes! He saw me..."

"Where, Susan?"

"He came to view the progress at the hospital on the same day the Dr. Lowe took us out there. He acted so polite, but I remembered what he did to you!"

"So, you abandoned me and went into hiding!"

"He is dead now! Somebody murdered him last week."

"That doesn't excuse what you did! As much as you try, Susan; you cannot live outside independently... not solely and forever..."

Susan gathered her composure and assumed a more controlled stance. She turned and approached Malvina; once again taking her hands, she said calmly,

"We will not worry about that now. Let us return to taking care of matters. You must recall that document, study it, and then write it down when you are able. Together, we must figure out why somebody is willing to kill for it."

June 4, 1882. Jack took an envelope of papers from his portfolio and handed it to Sheriff Tate, and then continued the report on his findings in New York.

"Here is a copy of a letter from Hamilton LeQuire & Son, Charleston to Caudwell Thomas, Esq., Petersburg, dated May 21, 1861 - the same Lawyer Thomas who is company attorney for the railroad. From what my father said, the late Colonel Wyche thought highly of him. It appears that Hamilton LeQuire, Jr. is informing Mr. Thomas of their immediate departure from the South. North Carolina passed an Ordinance of Secession the previous day, so Mr.

LeQuire is advising Thomas to take a train to Weldon immediately. Once there, an attorney named Richard Coats, representing Sarah Huffman, planned to call on him at the hotel. For the agreed upon reward of five-hundred dollars in gold, Coats would deliver the stolen bonds. Thereafter, until a suitable time presented itself, Thomas was to keep the bonds safe in his possession. The next few pages include the same list of investors who put up money to procure the bonds, a list of employees and agents working for LeQuire at the time of the theft, and a copy of a letter from Mrs. Huffman stating that her deceased husband participated in the robbery and hid the bonds. Obviously, they ended up in other hands. This does not tell us anything. Is there something that I am missing?" Tate answered,

"Yes, Jack; somebody told the scoundrels who stole the bonds about this letter. I suppose it was recently. Your mother said she kept the letter, but Mr. Thomas, Judge Coats, and Fred McAdams knew what was in it. Malvina McAdams told me that she took the bonds from the little coffin and hid them in the privy. When Senator Littlefield broke in, he wanted the bonds. Whether he found them or not, I cannot say. When I searched the privy behind the McAdams House, the bonds were gone. Mr. Thomas doesn't have them. Maybe, the Colonel or his wife found them; then again, it might be one of Malvina's fantasies. Whatever the case may be, Littlefield wasn't after the letter." Dr. Greene interjected,

"Where is Sarah Huffman?" Jack replied,

"After the war, Newton & LeQuire hired a well-respected detective agency run by a former Union officer named Rufus Willard – an individual of whom we are sufficiently familiar – to find Sarah Huffman. To date, their efforts have failed. Gentlemen, let us think about the problem afresh. In June of 1863, Mr. Thomas, functioning in the capacity of an agent of the Confederate Government, was travelling to Richmond to take up a new assignment. Along with his other papers, he carried a leather portfolio that contained the bonds. After boarding a northbound freight on which both Colonel Wyche and Fred McAdams were travelling, he was forced to take off on foot when the train encountered a skirmish at Panther Creek Bridge. While fleeing, he took a ball in the leg. McAdams rescued Thomas,

taking him to the home of a farmer near Spring Garden Station. It was there, the two made some arrangement whereby McAdams took the bonds for safekeeping. This account, of course, was transmitted by Thomas to Newton & LeQuire in 1865. When an agent of the firm approached McAdams that same year, he produced a signed receipt from the express agent at Wayne City that indicated the portfolio was sent to the Confederate Government at Richmond. Needless to say, we now know it was a ruse. McAdams was killed in 1873.” After a moment’s thought, Sheriff Tate said,

“Let us assume that the culprits were satisfied that the threat of exposure was removed with that act. Now, nearly a decade later, they find it necessary to silence McAdams’ circle of associates. We possess the document that contains clues to their identities, so we think. With the ease at which we obtained it, I think otherwise.” Jack interjected,

“Mrs. McAdams’ transcription from memory does not deviate from the text in the letter book in the slightest.” Tate frowned, then said,

“There must have been something else in that portfolio other than that letter.” Dr. Greene said,

“If there was something else, Malvina would remember; furthermore, Judith would have told us. That leaves but one person who should know, Mr. Thomas. Albeit my opinion; that gentleman exerts entirely too much control over many persons and situations. That he is executor of the Wyche estate does not give him the right to treat the late Colonel’s wife and daughter like children, nor should he assume responsibility for my wife’s safety.” Jack placed his hand on his father’s shoulder and said,

“He made the offer and Mother accepted it. It was her choice. Perhaps, given the near successful attempt on her life, there was little else to do. Let me present another thought. If this Sarah Huffman knew where the bonds were hidden, she likely knew some or all the participants in the plot. Judge Coats, the attorney representing her at the meeting at Weldon, might have conveyed this information to Mr.

Thomas or advised her to withhold it. On the other hand, our fugitive piece of damning evidence might not exist. Think of it; nobody more than Thomas stands to benefit by luring the schemers out into the open. He has spread out the other targets to unknown parts, leaving himself standing along on the field. Even so, he is surrounded by a phalanx. What a challenge! They must mount a direct attack lest his effort culminate in indictments. Indeed; it is a trap!” Shaking his head, Sheriff Tate cautioned,

“That might be true, but I am inclined to think that there is some actual evidence to be found; and furthermore, Mr. Thomas appears to be responding defensively. He secured the high ground, dug in, and sent the rest of his forces to the rear. Yet, I cannot imagine that he called forth demons from the past. Somebody else did.”

February 28, 1882. After his meeting with Mr. Cassidy in the cemetery, Dr. Lovejoy wasted little time in trying to establish communications with the Littlefield family, the home of the parents of Jane Wyche and also the place where Malvina McAdams was raised in her early childhood. He succeeded insofar as telegraphing a message to the sheriff of that county stating that he planned to meet him at Oak Crossroads, the nearest stop near the Littlefield plantation. It was about sixty miles from Gilridge on the line of the railroad, and Lovejoy thought it close enough to proceed without confirming any further details. With his niece Myrtle accompanying him, he departed Union Depot on the morning mail train. The two-hour trip brought them to Oak Crossroads at a quarter of noon.

Before the end of the war, the once promising village of Oak Crossroads was reduced to a ruinous state by the combined necessities of the Central Railroad and the Confederate Army. Situated more than half-way between Gilridge and Wayne City, it proved to be the best location for a supply depot. Troops were garrisoned there to respond to the frequent Union raids that occurred along the southern division of the railroad. Perceiving the need to remove their foundry and rail-mending shop to the interior, the company bought up two blocks of land fronting the line in town. Grand homes dating back to the early part of the century were demolished. Most of the affluent residents of Oak Crossroads left

during this period, and those that remained behind finally pulled up stakes during the Yankee occupation.

By the late 1870s, the railroad had abandoned its facilities in the town and reduced it to a fuel and water stop. Anybody wanting to board the train there had to stand on an open platform by the water tank and buy their tickets from the conductor. It did have a freight warehouse and a few men regularly worked there during the day. The county seat, about ten miles north of the depot, was the closest town of any size.

Dr. Lovejoy and Myrtle waited on the platform for the sheriff to arrive. After waiting for more than an hour, they explored the environs of the depot. One structure caught their attention almost immediately. Across from the depot, at the end of a vast overgrown lot, was an enormous three-story wooden building. Built in the Italianate style; it was ornate; and considering its size, even in a decrepit state, the structure was most impressive. One of the men in the warehouse told Lovejoy and Myrtle it was the Oak Female Seminary, a school for girls and young ladies. When the sheriff arrived, he filled in the details.

The Oak Female Seminary closed in the winter of 1860 during the early days of secession. Its existence had spanned a mere decade and its graduates numbered less than a hundred. To the casual observer, however, the superb architecture that housed the institution suggested that its founders apparently expected it would endure perpetually: at three stories, and crowned with an ostentatious cupola, the school was a pattern book perfect example. From the ornate brackets under the eaves of the roof to the arched triple hung windows, few structures within the region so well illustrated the master carpenter's craft. The first floor contained a hall with a grand staircase, a parlor, a library, and several rooms for classes; and the chapel and assembly hall were on the second floor. Rooms for the students and the women who looked after them occupied the third floor.

The faculty of the school was housed in a separate building on the school grounds across the street next to the railroad tracks, and

the servants lived in a two-story brick outbuilding at the rear of the school. The kitchen and dining hall were in a long one-story building between the school and the servants' quarters. While it existed, the town had a post office, several stores, and a town hall. The directors of the school ran everything; and strangely enough, they worked their influence from a distance. The regional ministers were suspicious of the school since it was not affiliated with any of the established denominations in the region, and some thought its claim to be a "seminary" was a gimmick. However, the tuition was expensive and few of the students were from local families, so the regional ministers had no interest in pressing an inquiry.

The sheriff did not anticipate that Dr. Lovejoy would be accompanied by a lady; he brought one other horse with him. They had to ride some distance to the Littlefield plantation, about seventeen miles due north of the depot on a dusty road. Myrtle wanted to stay behind to find out more about the girls' school. The sheriff told her that the old postmaster and his wife might know more about it. They lived a short distance from the depot. Dr. Lovejoy and the sheriff walked her down the dusty street crisscrossed by the tracks leading to the abandoned shops of the railroad. Beyond this unsightly collection of derelicts, the road turned into a picturesque tree lined avenue with several nice old houses, some having large yards with decorative gardens. This was the western edge of town, and it was inhabited by elderly holdouts from antebellum times. Beyond their sanctuary, the avenue turned down a wagon path leading into the pines.

The house of the elderly postmaster was a neat, whitewashed, two-story home – not austere – and old style, perhaps dating to the early 1800s. The sheriff introduced Dr. Lovejoy and his niece to the postmaster and his wife. Present in the household was the couple's unmarried daughter, a slim pleasant woman in her mid-thirties who spoke in a tiny girlish voice. Her name was Lydia. They were very happy to have visitors and asked if the three could stay for dinner. The sheriff answered for all by saying they would. Lacking any accommodations within a short distance, Lovejoy and Myrtle had no reason to protest the sheriff's presumption. Before the gentlemen set

out on their ride, they were offered a glass of homemade wine that was rather strong, but welcomed.

When Dr. Lovejoy and the sheriff reached the Littlefield plantation; they found a sprawling collection of worn-out tenant farmer houses with equally ragged looking occupants, various scattered outbuildings in distinct phases of falling apart, dogs and farm animals roaming about untended, and a patchwork of fields in different stages of fallowness. The main house, removed up a hill, was a long one-story rustic building surrounded by a porch on all sides. It was a world away from the postmaster's house at Oak Crossroads even though it was much larger. It appeared to have never been painted, so the wood lapboard had a gray appearance.

The aged Captain Jeremiah Littlefield, who presided over this fiefdom of disorder and indolence, reigned from a chair on the front porch. At his side was a daughter, whom nobody had ever heard mentioned in the discourses on Jane and the unfortunate Malvina. Her name was Susan, a young woman in her early twenties – another Susan. She wore a bonnet with the ribbon tied beneath her chin, and walked with a slight limp. Like the postmaster's daughter, this was another dutiful maiden that lived to attend to her parents. Unfortunately, her mother had passed during the previous winter causing her father to lose much of his interest in life. Still, he seemed to regain a measure of enthusiasm at the sight of visitors coming up the way. The gentleman soon reverted to melancholy upon learning of Malvina's illness and the passing of his old comrade Colonel Wyche. Dr. Lovejoy did not divulge details about her illness that might be upsetting. On the first mention of Jane, the old man immediately became bitter,

“She is an opportunistic she-devil!” When he learned that she had married Colonel Wyche and had not bothered to inform her parents, he said,

“It is a sure thing she had a hand in his death!” Dr. Lovejoy corrected this accusation by stating that he was killed by a man. He countered by saying,

“Then she put him up to it, I tell you! That girl is a bold-faced liar, schemer, and mantrap that would stop at nothing to get her way. I have been contemplating writing her out of my will; and after learning of her latest mischief, I will do it.”

Lovejoy changed the topic to Malvina, and then the Captain’s mood suddenly softened. He told the story of how they had taken in the girl after her mother died. The Colonel was with the United States Army at that time; then later, working as a civil engineer with various canal companies and railroads. Littlefield described a loving child, highly intelligent and witty. Their natural daughter Jane was excessively jealous of her adopted sibling and did everything in her power to make the girl feel worthless. He said,

“She even went so far as to make it appear that Malvina was responsible for all sorts of thievery and plundering around the plantation. Jane had the poor girl convinced that someday the family would give her over to the sheriff for hanging. She would have terrifying nightmares about it. Once, Jane fashioned a noose from a length of cord and placed it beside Malvina’s pillow while she was sleeping. It frightened her into a delirium that lasted for days. The last straw in the rivalry between the girls came when Jane tried to strike Malvina with his old saber. Grasping the blade in her hand, Jane gashed her palm horribly as she swung. After that, Malvina was sent to the female seminary at Oak Crossroads and Jane to a more rigorous school with a reputation for strict discipline.” Lovejoy asked

“Captain, can you tell us how she came to be in Gilridge during the war?”

“Certainly, sir; when the war started, and Malvina’s school closed, she was sent to Gilridge. It had a very good school for young ladies, and she boarded with one of the teachers, a Mrs. Greene. Do you know that Malvina can remember everything she reads?”

“Everything?”

“Everything! She has a mind like a photographic camera, that girl. Whole books she can recite perfectly word-for-word after a single reading. It is God-given, I tell you!” Dr. Lovejoy was surprised that Malvina and Judith shared a long history. It seemed strange that Dr. Greene did not mention it. The two spent most of the war serving as battlefield surgeons, and they shared many stories about their loved ones. This was particularly soothing since they rarely took leave. Furthermore, Malvina’s gift was a new twist. The Captain’s daughter Susan added,

“I was born the year before the war and have few recollections of anything about it. However, I remember Malvina returning home after it was over. She had met a dashing young man named Fred McAdams who held a high position with the railroad. He was older than her, but of the right age for a man – he was in his prime and full of promise. The wedding was held at the church at Oak Crossroads when they had regular preachers. During her time at home, she read aloud wonderful stories she penned about the adventures of a lady spy and her adopted daughter. Her name was Susan, like me. We delighted in Malvina’s great talent for storytelling.”

Dr. Lovejoy was already privy to Mrs. Greene’s secret wartime adventures through Dr. Greene’s comments to Myrtle. Now, the picture was coming into focus. Mrs. Greene used Malvina’s ability to remember every text encountered in her own secret activities. Who knows, she might have taken the young girl with her on these adventures. How could she do such a thing? The beloved teacher and socialite had a secret past. While laudable in some respects, it appeared not entirely a closed chapter. If the recent murders were connected to Mrs. Greene and the coffin, it was only a matter of time before Malvina became first on the death list. Momentarily, Lovejoy shifted his inquiry to Jane. He was curious about where she was prior to joining Malvina in Gilridge. Captain Littlefield answered,

“Between 1862 and early 1880, Jane resided at our plantation. At least in the realm of appearances, she was the model of the refined lady and dutiful daughter. We were convinced she had put aside her

childish evil-mindedness and had set her sights on the path of righteous womanhood. Fooled us all! She mastered the art of deception at that school. Under threat of the rod, you see; her willingness to please was merely an illusion, sir. She was biding her time until her route to escape appeared.” Susan added,

“Colonel Wyche was a close friend of my father since they both were together in the Mexican war. She went after him.” Slapping his knee, the Captain gave an ironic laugh and said,

“The Colonel had a weakness for the ladies, particularly those with a wicked side. My sister-in-law deceived him. Just take a good look at Malvina. She has a dark complexion and brown eyes, but the Colonel was fair-haired and blue-eyed and the same goes for her mother. Now, where do you suppose that came from? He believed he was the father, regardless; perhaps, because he wanted it to be true.”

Dr. Lovejoy was overwhelmed by this revelation! The old man did not stop there. He would not stop until he had driven the spear into Jane’s heart,

“Jane tried to seduce him, not once, but repeatedly. She kept after him! Then she persuaded him. It was a few years back. None of us here would have any part of it, I tell you! Nothing against the Colonel, we considered him part of the family. Listen friend, you can’t stand by and let your brother eat green peaches, even if they look mighty good.” Lovejoy said,

“I have one more question, if it isn’t too much trouble. Are there any more of your kin in the neighborhood?”

“Nope; this is the family, every bit of it here and abroad. Not counting Jane, because I disown her – that is, unless she has a boy before her time is done – this sweet girl next to me is the last of our line. Any boy she marries must change his name to Littlefield to inherit the plantation. It might not seem much anymore, but there are thousands of acres of pine attached to it. It is all part of the original king’s land grant to my great-great-grandfather. She can do nothing with it on her own. She’s a pretty thing and still in her prime. I am hoping you fellows take notice of that. Send any boys from

good families out this way to visit. I would appreciate it.” Susan smiled, then said,

“Please tell Malvina to write, would you?” Lovejoy asked,

“Are you not related to the late Senator William Grundy Littlefield? The Captain answered,

“Oh, he was a cousin of sorts – not a true Littlefield. His father married a Lucretia Littlefield. Her father made him change his name so there would be a continuation of their line. It is a shame that boy didn’t marry. Being next of kin, I suppose that I’ll inherit his estate.”

The whole sordid mess seemed much more like the court of the French monarchy than the genteel South, but not unbelievable considering the patriarchal excesses of the antebellum chivalry. All about the old soldier on his decaying plantation there was serfdom where there had been slavery; the ragged daughters of dependent sharecroppers were still fair game for a lecherous landed aristocrat, albeit a shabby pantomime of the past. That could be, but it was not so. Here, father and daughter were besieged by their underlings with little hope that either could forestall ruin for long. That is, unless Susan married well... and soon.

While Dr. Lovejoy and the sheriff were at the Littlefield plantation, Myrtle was enjoying the afternoon with her new friend. The tall, slim woman in white with the “tiny girl voice” strolling off to the school with the woman in black with the deep, hard, slightly Germanic voice was visually and audibly a study in contrast. They behaved in the fashion of steadfast friends of many years, perhaps because of the isolation of one and the eccentricities of the other. Myrtle learned that Judith Greene resided in Oak Crossroads briefly at the close of the war with her infant son, Andrew Jackson Greene; Malvina was there also. Lydia said all three lived in her parent’s house.

A gentleman who worked in the warehouse was hired as caretaker of the decrepit school. It was now the property of the

county and could be purchased at a reasonable price. The dying town discouraged any interested buyers since neither the school nor the land it was built upon offered any potential for profit. Upon entering the school, the ladies were struck by its vast openness. Stripped of everything, the assembly hall echoed their footsteps. The atmosphere was dank and had the peculiar aroma of old wood. There was not as much as a scrap of paper to be found; not only there, but throughout the entire building. The classrooms, the rooms of the teachers and girls, the kitchen and dining hall, and the attic were as cleared of the evidence of habitation as if it were newly completed. Myrtle asked the gentleman from the warehouse why it was so thoroughly empty. He told the ladies it was cleared out when the school closed. Everything was crated – furnishings, utensils, linens, records, and whatever – and loaded on a train. The faculty that taught the girls left together on the same train. They even took the cook and housekeeper with them – on New Year’s Day in 1861. They left the building as the ladies observed it at that instant. The last of the girls left a week before Christmas. He said,

“The few residents of Oak Crossroads that remain from that time cannot recall the name of the organization that ran it; if you need to know, look up their charter at the county courthouse.”

After nearly an hour exploring the school, they returned to the postmaster’s house for tea. Myrtle remarked to Lydia,

“Something about that old school disturbs me.”

Dr. Lovejoy and the sheriff returned from their visit around four o’clock that afternoon and were treated to an early dinner. After a pleasant conversation, the sheriff went home and Dr. Lovejoy and Myrtle said their good-byes. The ladies promised to write each other and hoped they could visit again. They would, in short order, when Little Jack came to Gilridge. The evening air started getting cold when the sun set at six o’clock. As the last light of the day faded, the unseasonable temperatures gave way to winter. The train was scheduled to stop at half past six, so they had to wait on the platform

for a while. Dr. Lovejoy draped his overcoat over Myrtle's shoulders – she was feeling the chill.

In a single afternoon, Dr. Lovejoy and Myrtle uncovered so much that was strange and disturbing. They were, yet, missing so many pieces of the puzzle. The doctors at County Hospital could not share what they knew about Malvina and the transcribed document; Dr. Greene was not going to share anything about his wife that might expose her to prosecution; Mr. Thomas had no intention of sharing anything about Fred McAdams and the existence of the bonds, his discussions with Colonel Wyche, or anything concerning Malvina's torment at the hands of Senator Littlefield. Mrs. Greene concealed anything that might put her son in danger; Mr. Cassidy would not admit to knowing that the child's coffin once contained the bonds and there was a connection between them and the murdered men. The bonds were in Jane's possession and she knew that they were stolen. Nevertheless, she was intent upon redeeming them if she could escape the ever-watchful eye of Mr. Thomas and his detectives. Then, there was Malvina; she disguised what she knew as fiction. Yet, somebody was able to see through her colorful tales. The mystery was unsolvable if each of the invested parties jealously guarded their secrets. One of them needed to break the silence.

July 14, 1882. Not long after Judith and Mr. Kerr left on their rail adventure, a lady detective from Captain Willard's agency joined them. Her name was Miss Sophia Rutherford, a young woman in her twenties. She was remarkably average, not only in height and build, but in all other respects except in skills and intellect. Like Mrs. Greene, she could act; however, there was an important difference. Sophia was the type of actress who was so ordinary in real life as to go unnoticed – not that she was plain or homely – she was average to the point of being invisible. On stage, she could transform into any character – sultry to grotesque. Captain Willard saw in her the potential to take on disguises, or to exploit her state of being ignored. Mrs. Greene delighted in her company, and Mr. Kerr found their camaraderie entertaining.

Over the extent of her travels, Judith had acquired an impressive collection of tools and hardware to busy her during the long hours confined to the car. Not once during their brief stops was there any opportunity to tour the places that she described so vividly in her newspaper column. Most of her articles were the product of research – that is, reading the histories of various locations – supplemented by whirlwind carriage rides during their stops. Occasionally, she enjoyed a day of shopping, but never was allowed the luxury of attending the theatre or staying the night in a hotel. Though she thought it was unlikely the assassins were on their trail, the constant movement did not bother her. Separation from her husband and son, however, weighed heavily on her heart. On this evening, Judith was at her desk turned workbench filing down a small piece of metal. Sophia sat on the sofa sorting through a wooden box filled with hardware, mainly lock sets for doors. Judith asked,

“Sophia, there are so many aspects of this way of life that appeal to me. I like to travel, and the company of both you and Mr. Kerr is most stimulating. Still, the purpose of keeping me in constant motion is perplexing. Is my life so valuable to Mr. Thomas that it must be preserved at such a cost?”

“You should not ask such questions, Mrs. Greene. Let us continue with what we were doing, whatever that is... my goodness!” Sophia removes four new mortise lock sets from the box and places them on the sofa. “Which one do you want?” Mrs. Greene answered,

“Any would be fine.” Sophia handed one of the four door locks to her. Taking a screwdriver, Judith removed the screws of the case of the lockset as she continued her conversation. Sophia said,

“Tell me about the boys. Did they teach you this?”

“No, dear, I taught myself. The boys taught me meanness... Well, not exactly. Those were different times and a certain measure of audacity was requisite for facing life’s brutality. Everything in town was dirty and smelled horrible. There were periods when sickness swept through the town. Almost every time, one of your schoolmates died. Then, there were other horrible things that seemed perfectly normal at the time; today, when they come to mind,

my shamefulfulness of having witnessed them causes me to shudder. Watching from my bedroom window two neighbors dueling with pistols in the adjoining field was a terrifying sight. They were young men; I liked both very well. There were other things much worse that I will refrain from describing. The boys were my friends, and we learn together how to come to terms with the evil around us. Then, it all changed quickly. They built the railroad. Then a great fire destroyed most of the old town, the ugly part, including the part known as 'the old field.' That was the place criminals received their punishment. By the time I was a young lady, all the town was tree lined avenues with fine homes in the correct style, schools, beautiful churches, and the theatre. The boys grew into proper gentlemen, and my rough ways were smothered under layers of finery and culture... that is, until the war." Judith took off the lid of the mortice lockset and displayed the inner parts to Sophia. "Observe how this works. The key turns, catches here, pulls the bar, lifts, and falls away. The door is now unlocked. With this little tool that I fashioned, insert it in the keyhole directly upwards, then lift and move the bar. There is a bend on one end; you can bury it deep within your hair so it will not fall out or be seen. Here, dear, this is for you." Judith handed the lock pick to Sophia.

"Thank you for making this for me. Before the week is done, I would like to be able open any of these door locks... and these padlocks." Judith picked up another tool she created from the desk and handed it to Sophia.

"Here is the other. It is nothing more than a watch spring held in a coil by a clip. It is the other tool that I keep with me always. Both, on occasions, have saved my life." Sophia asked,

"I was impressed by the story of your escape from the killer that tried to drown you; not to mention the several occasions when you confounded Captain Willard during the war." Judith took a cotton cloth from the desk and wiped her hands. Looking into Sophia's eyes, she said,

"The telegraph transmitted via the office today a message from my son asked whether there had been other attempts on my life prior

to the recent murders. When Mr. Kerr presented it to me this morning, I told him to reply saying that there were three attempts. The first was in 1867, the second in 1873 after the murder of Fred McAdams, and the third in 1878. That was all that I wanted him to report. The details, I felt, might upset the boy; and I know for certain, my husband could do without further worry. Still, upon considering that there could be some facet of my recollection that might expose the murders, I provided Captain Willard with a more complete account.”

“Would you tell me, Mrs. Greene?”

“Have you ever been in mortal danger, Miss Rutherford?”

“I have been in dangerous situations; it is a given in this line of work. Even so, nobody has tried to murder me, nor have I found myself cornered. My colleagues are close at hand to render assistance if trouble arises.”

“That is very different... Two years after the war, when my husband was battling an outbreak of diphtheria in the town – at that time, overrun with refugees from the countryside – I traveled to Oak Crossroads to see my Little Jack. You could imagine what it was like in those days. Union troops occupied every town along the railroad; I assumed the day would eventually come when they would recognize me. It seems that my efforts during the war were deemed insignificant in the long run; perhaps, in the confusion of those years, I fell through the cracks. Nevertheless, my anxiety was not diminished in the slightest. Colonel Wyche, together with my devilish boys, pledged their honor never to reveal the slightest detail about my adventures, even to my husband. I didn’t think Malvina would tell... It was early December; the train stopped ten miles out of town at the Northeast Depot because there was trouble with the engine. Since the work of getting it back in running order was expected to take an hour, I let the cars with several other passengers to have a cup of tea inside the depot. A man travelling in my car handed me an envelope on the platform, then walked away towards the river. He didn’t return to the train when it was ready to continue. The note stated that on the following Thursday, I was to take the evening mail train as far as Rockfish Station, forty miles up the line. There, a

carriage would be waiting for me. I was to come alone and bring the bonds. Failing to do so would put my husband's life in jeopardy. On returning to Gilridge, I told Fred. He called together Billy Littlefield, Judge Dick Coats, and some fellows. They came up with a plan. On the appointed day, Billy and Dick took the morning train to Rockfish to set up an ambush for the villain. Billy's associates kept an eye on Phillip to make sure that he was safe. Fred gave me a leather case full of blank paper to make it appear as though it contained the bonds. He procured several horses and proceeded to Rockfish on the freight train the day before the other two. When it came time for me to play my part, I boarded the train – all the while worrying what would happen to Phillip and the boys if something went wrong. Little Jack was safe at Oak Crossroads; yet, knowing that someone had found out about me made it necessary to remove him to a school far away. At Rockfish, I left the cars to wait alone on the platform as I was instructed. All the while, my heart raced, and it seemed like taking a breath demanded a conscious effort. After a while, Fred road up alone. He told me that there was nothing to worry about, and that I should wait for the evening express to take me back to town. When I asked about the villain, he said that there were two men. 'Billy was asking them a few questions about the weather in the highlands.' That meant he was using his preferred method of interrogation. 'Dick had papers.' Having papers was his preferred method of putting individuals who presented problems in their place." Sophia asked,

"Could you be more specific about these methods?"

"Miss Rutherford, I must explain something to you. Fred, Dick, and Billy were evil-minded boys, but they loved me like a sister. They were never sweet to me, but they loved me. Their meanness was a part of them that was reprehensible... and something, I admired. Still, to my knowledge, there is no instance where their methods resulted in murder. Fred told me that the scoundrels planned to kill me after I gave them the bonds. Dick filled out some papers that made them appear to be convicts, and then the two were delivered to the chain gang that was relaying the rails. The overseer never checks the transfer orders."

“Mrs. Greene! That is the most horrible miscarriage of justice that I have ever heard. Regardless of how much they loved you, no person with the slightest measure of decency would approve of such things – certainly no judge in the civilized world!”

“All are dead! Whatever crimes they committed in life have been wiped clear by their death – very horrible deaths! Allow me to continue. Fred told me that the men confessed to having agreed to do the job for five hundred dollars in hard coin. They were hired by old planters who threaten to turn out their wives and children – they were sharecroppers – if they revealed their identity. Dick told them they would have time to think about it.”

“So, did the men tell?”

“I don’t know, Miss Rutherford. Fred McAdams was murdered, and two men tried to abduct me a week later. I pull my revolver and shot one of them in the arm. It happened while I was leaving the school in the evening at twilight. The two ran up from both sides as I was getting into my buggy. They had kerchiefs over their faces. When the residents of the neighborhood came running, I reported that two men tried to rob me. The constables tried to find them, but they escaped. Then, in 1878, Billy just so happened to hear from one of his thugs that there was a man asking around the docks for hirelings to do a kidnapping. Billy paid informants and ruffians for political persuasion.” Sophia asked,

“So, these are your gentlemen admirers?”

“Yes... the world is a dirty and dangerous place, young lady. Had my gentlemen friends not the gift of evil-mindedness, anything could have happened to me. My husband and son need not know the particulars of these occurrences. I have a part to play and it is not entirely for my benefit. Only recently, the evil from my past has reawakened.”

“Why the long intermission?”

“Somebody betrayed all of us.”

“Allow me to present my thoughts. If these people have been trying to get you since 1867, then you are the one who was betrayed.

It is only as of late that your gentlemen admirers became targets. Ironically, had you not sought help from Colonel Wyche, Mr. Thomas would have never known there was a connection between Fred McAdams and you. He always suspected Malvina McAdams knew something, but not you. How do you figure that?" After a moment's thought, Judith said,

"I don't understand. Fred never asked where I hid the bonds. He told me to find a good place where the Yankees would never think of looking. He didn't know about my plan, nor did Billy or Dick. Malvina was the only one who knew the plan, yet never knew that I intended to bury the little casket in the family crypt. I assume she told Fred; he simply made a propitious deduction... Good Lord! Despite everything, it does make sense to me how our murderous adversaries picked me as the prize."

"Who else but Malvina McAdams; it is obvious. Perhaps, not intentionally; but certainly, the wrong company was there to hear her. I think the intuitions of that railroad detective Mr. Cassidy might be honed to an edge... Jane Wyche."

CHAPTER THREE

February 17, 1882. The woman who had tried to drown Mrs. Greene was swept downstream for about a quarter of a mile through that part of the river known as the ship channel. The capsized boat followed her and she saved herself by clinging to it, struggling to hold her head above water. At a crook in the river, she swam to a piece of land jutting out known as Clark's Point. Here the authorities found the boat and her coat. The footprints she left in the mud led into an old rice field; here, she lost a shoe. The trail of her struggle through the muck ended at a sandy path that continued to the causeway. How she made her escape from there is unknown, but apparently she did. It would have been easy to find her body because nearly all the land had been cleared for rice cultivation. Considering the frigid temperature that night, remarkably, she did not die of exposure.

The best assumption that anyone could imagine that would account for her clean getaway was that she had an accomplice or hireling waiting on that side of the river. Otherwise, somebody came to her aid and was likely paid off to keep quiet. Regardless, once again, the authorities ran out of clues. Mr. Cassidy, however, was undaunted by the challenge. It seemed plausible to him that the lady he observed spying at the depot was likely the woman who tried to kill Mrs. Greene. Her associate, the man whom the woman met briefly outside the depot, was the same that killed the Colonel. Probably she left town that day by train; it seemed logical to Cassidy, she disappeared by train this time. Since the police were looking for a woman of her description – one who surely bore facial injuries from the pummeling she received at the hands of Mrs. Greene – it seemed unlikely she would have returned to Union Depot. He thought her best bet was to board the southbound train at the tiny station on the west side of the river. She had to procure or purloin a change of clothing, and preferably, a hat with a veil to go unnoticed. All of this needed to be done quickly before the search caught up with her.

The wheels of the detective's mind pondered the woman's escape the minute he learned of the murder attempt on Mrs. Greene. That Friday night, he was having supper at the railroad dining hall. Since the murder of Colonel Wyche, he haunted Union Depot patiently awaiting the return of the mystery woman when the passenger trains arrived. Rushing to County Hospital after the city police captain informed him; he joined in the questioning of the two men from the wharves who rescued Mrs. Greene. Like the city police, he could not question the injured woman that evening. Nevertheless, he returned in the morning, deliberately waiting until the police finished. After speaking with Mrs. Greene, he was convinced that the woman that tried to drown her and the woman from the depot were the same. He did not question her on other matters because he anticipated that she had reason to mislead him. Obviously, he thought she was protecting somebody. He assumed it was Malvina, and Jane Wyche could explain the reason. This was not the case.

Because Mrs. Greene outwitted her would-be assassin, all involved in the investigation realized that the string of unexplained murders that occurred recently were likely committed by a man and woman working together. Even so, it was puzzling why the woman wanted to drown Mrs. Greene. If she succeeded, the body might never have been found. The previous murders were somewhat theatrical, conceived in every detail to inspire fear and horror. With Mrs. Greene, the assassin intended her victim to feel fear and horror in a personal way. Perhaps, it was to exact revenge for losing her fellow assassin, the man shot by Mr. Cassidy? Why not kill Cassidy instead? Indeed, there was something more than vengeance. Cassidy did not see Mrs. Greene pass the document to Colonel Wyche, nor did the woman assassin. Had Mrs. Greene disappeared, nobody would know it existed; if it surfaced someday, it would be unlikely anybody would realize it meant anything. Jane Wyche had it along with the bonds, but what of it? A meeting at Weldon, Sarah Huffman, a list of names; she didn't care. It actually was nothing. That is, if Malvina had not exercised poetic license in her tale of wartime espionage – the lady spy and her daughter... and “the

encoded letter that contained the names of the traitors.” That was what Louisa heard.

Dr. Greene raced through the Southside in his buggy on his way to the hospital. Judith, having downed a considerable amount of brandy, was tipsy. Albert and Norwood, the workers from the docks, went immediately to the police station. Dr. Lowe had already retired for the evening when Dr. Greene came a-pounding at his door. It was a quarter after eleven by the time the operating room was set up for Judith. Upon looking at her wound, Dr. Lowe said,

“Mrs. Greene, you have a furrow dug down the side of your upper leg.” In a nonchalant tone, she asked her husband,

“Phillip, can’t you fellows just pinch it together and sew it up?” Reaching for a large bottle of disinfectant, Dr. Lowe grumbled,

“You have been swimming in that river, so the wounds must be thoroughly disinfected. There are certain doctors who have other ideas, but we are inclined to follow this method. Besides that, you have lost blood; you are shivering, and I am afraid you might faint any minute. You need to lie down.”

“On this bench?”

“It’s not a bench, Mrs. Greene.”

“All right, if you insist.” Iris, one of the night nurses, entered the operating room. She said,

“Two men from the docks and the constables just rode up. The captain of police wants to talk with Mrs. Greene.” Perturbed, Dr. Lowe replied,

“Not right now! She is not in any condition to answer questions.” Judith interjected,

“They need to look for Mr. Sugar-tooth!”

“Who?” Dr. Greene shook his head and muttered,

“That’s her horse. Iris, tell them to go look for her horse.” Judith grasped Iris’ sleeve, and said,

“He is light brown with a long white spot that runs from his forehead to the tip of his nose. Please tell them, dear! Oh, I am so worried about the poor thing!” Dr. Lowe grumbled,

“Alright; that’s enough.” Iris returned to the policeman to convey Dr. Lowe’s reply. Judith exclaimed,

“Oh, Dr. Lowe, I’ve done murder! I know I have!” He replied,

“Self-defense is not murder, Judith! You will need to turn on your side so we can flush the wound.”

“Is it going to hurt?” Dr. Greene answered,

“Yes, it’s going to hurt. It is the same solution I used back at the house. Turn on your side, dear, and grit your teeth.” She asked,

“And that wasn’t enough? Good Lord, Phillip!”

The doctors had a time, treating Mrs. Greene. Eventually, she calmed down on her own after they had completed their work. With the aid of Iris, they helped her over to the main building of the hospital. There, she received a good scrub down and was dressed for bed. Once again, Dr. Greene spent another night in the hospital napping when it was possible. He had a meal of hard-boiled eggs, bread, and soup with young Dr. Wilson around three in the morning.

February 7, 1882. Regardless of her unfortunate predicament, Dr. Lowe was determined that a meeting with Jane Littlefield Wyche could not wait. Calling Monday afternoon at the home of the late Colonel, he arranged an appointment for the following day at ten in the morning.

When the meeting occurred, Dr. Greene was in attendance; and for the initial fifteen minutes of the meeting, Mr. Thomas, the attorney for the railroad was present. His principal purpose in being there was to verify several old documents bearing the signatures of Jane Littlefield and Malvina McAdams. Witnessed by Joseph Wyche, they granted Jane Littlefield power of attorney over the estate of

Malvina. The lawyer assured the doctors it was authentic and it had been registered. He then asked whether the doctors knew of any documents pertaining to the transfer of Malvina from the police to the hospital. Puzzled, the doctors admitted that they did not. Thomas asked,

“Then, she was not in their custody?” Dr. Lowe answered tersely,

“The police and a group of railroad men found her. Nothing was said of any charges.” Mr. Thomas smiled smugly and said,

“Let us say ‘officially’ nothing out of the ordinary happened. The police were not present and the men from the railroad knew nothing about Malvina’s evening stroll through the cemetery; ‘officially’, Mrs. Wyche, not the police, committed Malvina to the hospital...”

Dr. Lowe took a deep breath and said,

“We have her signature on our records admitting, not committing, Malvina to the hospital, sir. As for the police, it is not our concern and we will not discuss it.” Satisfied with the outcome of the proceedings, he excused himself, leaving Jane and the doctors to discuss other matters. Jane asked,

"Dr. Lowe, you must accept my apologies for that unpleasantness the last time we met. Now, I see you were right all along; and if I listened to you, all that happened to Malvina could have been averted. I am not averse to keeping her in the hospital indefinitely; at least, until such provisions can be made for her treatment at a respectable infirmary." Dr. Lowe glared at Jane for a moment, then said,

“Malvina cannot stay in the County Hospital indefinitely, Mrs. Wyche.” Jane gave him a strained smile, then asked,

“Then, how long can you keep her?” Dr. Greene replied,

“She could be moved home to recover within a week, maybe two at most.”

"I cannot have her here! Not that soon." The two doctors, particularly Dr. Lowe, were dumbfounded by the cool manner in which Jane was addressing the situation. It was only a prelude to what was coming. They would leave the discussion utterly shocked and incredulous.

"This situation must be addressed with the utmost discretion since the family reputation must remain untarnished. While I apologize for the inconvenience that Malvina caused the hospital staff, I would appreciate your cooperation in keeping the details of the whole affair private. Surely, you understand, gentlemen?" Puzzled, Dr. Greene asked,

"Forgive me if I am confused, but Malvina was seriously injured; and I am sure Dr. Lowe would agree with me on this point, treating her was not an inconvenience. That is our vocation."

"Yes, Dr. Greene. However, if treatment was required for an injury she caused, I would call such actions an imposition. She is a burden upon the family." Dr. Lowe asked,

"I am very curious about your use of the word 'family.' While you and Malvina might technically constitute a family. The term usually applies to any arrangement that includes miscellaneous husbands and children. I assume you are speaking of parents, siblings, cousins, etc. – living elsewhere in the state or abroad?"

"There are others close by that might suffer undue prejudice if it were generally known that madness runs in the family. I have a younger sister." This is the first time the doctors heard of this. Dr. Lowe replied,

"I understand."

"No, you don't, Dr. Lowe. It is more than it seems..." Dr. Greene interjected,

"Malvina is not mad. She is something else."

"Do you know a cure for it?"

"No, Mrs. Wyche. I don't even know how to describe it, much less recommend a cure."

“Then do not trouble yourself, sir.”

“Who might this ‘friend’ be that Malvina speaks so highly of?” Jane assumed an irritated tone.

“Sir, you mean to tell me you have not had the pleasure of meeting the vivacious Miss Susan? Detestably genteel and such a know-it-all, she is! If only I were so blessed to have such friends, even though they might be imaginary.”

“She is not imaginary.”

“Maybe, you are right. I have become so used to her being there that it is difficult to resist being beguiled by her charms. Even when she is spiteful and cutting, her presence is reassuring. However, she is not Malvina; there is genius in her madness and fatuousness in her sanity. My sensibilities direct me to assert that Malvina is two persons, not one or the other. Surely, if one were to die and the other survive, would not Malvina die just the same?” Dr. Lowe was struck by this remark. Putting aside his animosity for Jane, he said,

“While I appreciate your candidness, we must discuss a matter more pressing; particularly, in light of recent events. I am aware that this might trouble you after your terrible loss. Nevertheless, I am convinced Malvina was subjected to a violent treatment in the past by assailants that broke into her house. Only yesterday, Malvina revealed the identity of their leader to Dr. Greene.”

“Nothing can be done about it! Mr. Thomas was the first to know. According to him, they tried to strangle her.” Concerned, Dr. Greene asked,

“And he didn’t tell the authorities?” Jane said,

“Malvina is not a credible person, sir! Colonel Wyche thought it best to send for me to take charge of her household and ensure that she was never alone.” Dr. Lowe asked,

“Was somebody after Malvina that night?”

“She thought somebody was after her.” He continued,

“Can you be sure?”

“Considering that my husband was gunned down on the threshold of your hospital, I cannot be sure.” Dr. Greene rubbed his forehead and pondered. He then asked,

“Do you think she is safe now?”

“Didn’t Mr. Cassidy take care of that problem, sir?”

“There is no way of knowing with any certainty.” Jane looked away and took a deep breath.

“You cannot defend yourself against the unknown. The Colonel told me before he died, there is no sure defense against an enemy that has no name and whose purposes cannot be discerned.” Dr. Lowe said,

“Mrs. Wyche, I am responsible for the safety of all the patients in the hospital, not just Malvina. It is my understanding the Colonel employed armed guards to protect her. Why have you dismissed them?”

“They proved their uselessness when Malvina slipped past them, Dr. Lowe! Unless Mr. Thomas insists upon bringing them back, I will not have them around. During the last week of the Colonel’s life, he did things I did not understand. Why, Dr. Greene, did he send Malvina and your wife off on a spur-of-the-moment train excursion?”

“Indeed! Hitherto, nobody, including my wife, has been forthcoming with me, Mrs. Wyche. At this moment, she is off visiting our son at his college.”

“My husband was not entirely forthcoming with me also, Dr. Greene. Mr. Thomas is the executor of his estate, and it might please you to know that the Colonel gave him the authority to ensure Malvina’s well-being was given the highest consideration. He has a deep affection for her and utter mistrust of me, so I am something of a bondservant to my adopted sister. Mr. Thomas directs my actions.” Dr. Lowe asked,

“If so, why did he walk out of this meeting?”

“He is above such tiresome discussions. He is the master builder of our present, and one can expect few alterations to his designs. Perhaps, he might be persuaded to provide additional compensation for the inconveniences.” Dr. Lowe assured her,

“We will not charge you above the amount required for our services – not more than any patient with needs such as Malvina. This is, on the condition that when her physical injuries are thoroughly healed, her other afflictions be addressed at another institution.” Jane folded her arms and said,

“Mr. Thomas is making arrangements as we speak for our exile. You can expect to be done with us in short order.” Lowe addressed her firmly,

“Under any other situation, Mrs. Wyche, we would not be having such a conversation. We should not be having it now. Unavoidably, we are personally connected; but I will not let that determine our treatment of the patient. I will not allow the almighty Mr. Thomas to interfere, nor will he divert our attention away from other patients. Otherwise, he can lavish all the comforts and niceties that your money can buy on Malvina insomuch as it does not disrupt the normal operations at the hospital. You can convey my ultimatum to his highness when he condescends to listen to Malvina’s bondservant.”

Dr. Lowe and Dr. Greene, setting off on their long walk up Rose Street, were mentally exhausted and somewhat bewildered by what Dr. Greene called “the unexpected airing-out of a tomb.” Lowe said he felt like a shell had exploded near him. Never before had he been mentally and spiritually thrown about and rendered confounded by anybody, man or woman. He asked Dr. Greene whether Jane put on an act, had they been played for some ulterior purpose. Greene, having considered himself played for some time now, regarded Jane bankrupt of any thought other than performing a duty.

Lowe disagreed. He thought of her as a superior intellect, the queen of manipulation and deception, who crafted her words

carefully to deliver the hardest blows to throw the listener off balance. He did not believe that Mr. Thomas was as controlling as Jane portrayed him. When Jane mentioned Malvina's "friend", he imagined that she was speaking of herself. He could not shake the nagging feeling that something was not right!

Passing the McAdams House between the fifth and sixth blocks of Rose Street, thoughts of the suffering Malvina had endured over her lifetime filled his imagination. Dr. Greene interrupted his thoughts by saying,

"Jacob, I believe we are being deceived by all of them: Mrs. Wyche, Mr. Thomas, 'the friend' Susan; all are concealing something. Of the lot, this Susan, by far, is both clever and devious in the most charming way. Still, in having her way, she might do us a great service."

"You are talking about somebody that doesn't exist."

"Not exactly; she was there all along; and I believe; she loves Malvina. That is not too hard to comprehend considering she is really a part of Malvina. She is trying to tell us what happened there, and I believe it is not a delusion. The danger she fears is real."

"I am not one to place much credence in feelings, but I sense Malvina is still in danger. Please, when your wife returns from – did I hear you correctly?"

"I am not bothered in the least about her high adventures during the war – actually I am rather proud of it, and it doesn't surprise me. That is my Judith! My son is an attorney!"

"So, your son is the first Greene in a century and a half that doesn't aspire to be a physician?"

"That's not my fault, Jacob. All the same, good will come of this eventually – I know it! Now, we have to help Malvina. Deep down, I know my wife knows the answers; perhaps, she wants to consult our son the lawyer first."

February 18, 1882. The parlor on the second floor of County Hospital was painted pale blue and furnished with a few upholstered

chairs and a table. Judith was seated in a chair near the fireplace, donning a loose-fitting white dress with a wool shawl draped over her shoulders. Her legs rested on pillows placed on an ottoman. Malvina, now able to move about considerably well, was seated in the twin to Judith's chair by the fireplace. Wearing a black day dress and steadying herself with a cane, she looked like an older woman. The nurse Elizabeth helped her when she walked because too much movement easily exhausted her. Nevertheless, there were moments when Malvina became excited, and then felt lightheaded. When both ladies were seated comfortably, Elizabeth conversed with them.

"Are you comfortable, Mrs. Greene? I hope the visits from the police and Mr. Cassidy did not tire you out too much. You have been through an awful ordeal."

"How long does Dr. Lowe plan to keep me?" Malvina, so much wanted to speak with Judith, interjected,

"You'll be safe here." She asked,

"Did the Yankees shoot you? Jane told me that father was killed in battle." Painfully, after telling Malvina how sorry she felt about her father's death, Judith could hardly hold back the tears. She felt at fault for having brought down all these terrible things upon Malvina's family. To this, almost in a commanding tone, Malvina said,

"Don't say that!" Elizabeth, whispered,

"Mrs. Greene! Please. You mustn't speak about the Colonel. It's upsetting to her. She'll close up like a clam." Judith asked who told Malvina about the shooting. Elizabeth explained that Jane did so reluctantly after Malvina insisted on seeing him. The gun shots she heard while in the operating room had led her to think there was a battle outside. Jane let her think her father was battling Yankees. The doctors didn't correct this misconception out of a concern it would further distress her.

"What are you whispering about?" Judith said,

“My husband has taken up chewing tobacco again.” Elizabeth, at first puzzled, affirmed her statement.

“Yes... he should really stop that nasty habit.”

“Did he have his breakfast?” Judith asked,

“What’s that, Malvina?”

“That is what you should ask Elizabeth. You were thinking about it. I could see it in your eyes. You look that way every time you are worried about him. When he was away at the war, any time his name was mentioned that worried look would appear. Did you not see him today?” Judith asked Elizabeth,

“Did he have breakfast?”

“Boiled eggs and coffee.”

“That’s not enough! He didn’t have supper... It is my fault, Elizabeth.” Malvina exclaimed,

“He said Mr. Bacon has your horse.”

“He does? Oh, my dear little horse! Where is he?”

“A gentleman from the town brought up your horse from River Street. Mr. Bacon put him in the stable with the other horse.”

“I have been so worried about him!”

“You have been worrying more about your husband.”

“Do you remember Little Jack?” Fondly, Malvina asked,

“The baby?”

“Little Jack is all grown up and studying law in college! I want to visit him as soon as they let me.”

“Can I see him?” Taking Malvina’s hand, Judith said,

“He plans to visit... We will talk about it later.”

Malvina produced two pieces of folded paper from her sleeve, and then handed them to Mrs. Greene. A look of amazement crossed Judith’s face as she read.

“What is this?” Malvina answered,

“The first twenty letters of the alphabet are ordered in groups of five starting with the high cards of each running backwards. So, the ten of clubs is “A,” and “T” is the six of spades. The six remaining letters are the face cards in order with the two highest ranking suits, hearts and spades, “U” is the jack of hearts, and “Z” is the king of spades. The numbers are the threes and fours of all suits in alternating order; the three of clubs are zero and the four of clubs is four. The ace of hearts is eight, and nine is the ace of spades. The symbols of the suits are not used, but are represented by orienting the letter or number in the four cardinal directions, the top of the letter or number is like a compass needle with south corresponding to the highest suit, and the lowest being the opposite; an upside down “A” is the ace of spades. Remember, the symbols and numbers are missing from one side of the cards?” Elizabeth asked,

“Is this a new type of card game?” Judith nervously answered,

“Oh, yes! Isn’t she clever?” Joyfully, Malvina explained,

“WE figured it out together! I used the library.”

Elizabeth was baffled. A room on the first floor of the hospital was set aside for use as a library for medical texts and journals that the doctors referred to from time to time. Malvina was not speaking of this library, but her mental creation where she met Susan to converse and work out problems. Judith interjected,

“You mean the library at home?” Continuing in whisper, she said, “But what is it?” Malvina, realizing that she almost slipped up, said,

“Oh, yes... you should make a copy for yourself. There is more to it than that. I have not figured out the rest of the game. Let me know what you think; then we will play the game together.” Judith said,

“I will...” At that moment, Dr. Lowe entered the room.

“Oh, Dr. Lowe. The ladies have been visiting. Are you here to see Mrs. McAdams or Mrs. Greene?”

“Both, Elizabeth; I am paying my respects to both. I imagine Mrs. Greene is getting restless?” Judith responded,

“I am not! When can I go home? Phillip has not had a proper breakfast; and I hear he was up all the night.” Malvina interjected,

“And he is chewing tobacco.”

“No, he is not! Elizabeth, are you getting these ladies agitated?” She answered,

“Not intentionally.”

“Mrs. Green, you take the cake. Yesterday, you were shot, nearly drown, and if that was not enough; you could have died of exposure if it wasn’t for those two men from the wharves. Today, all you can think about is whether your husband had a proper breakfast? You have the distinction of being the first lady whom I have ever treated for a gunshot wound, albeit a flesh wound. The police captain was just here. He told me they found a lady's coat and shoe out near the old rice fields. The shoe was stuck into the mud, so you know she didn’t drown. Her footprints ended at the causeway and everything suggests that she had an accomplice. According to the police, the captain intends to post a constable here around the clock for the next few days. As soon as you have healed to where I am confident you will not get that wound infected, your husband – wise gentleman whom he is – plans to send you on a little trip.” Surprised, Judith asked,

“The little witch didn’t die? Dr. Lowe, you have taken a great burden off my shoulders. Now, I can rest easy knowing I did not do murder.” At that moment, Malvina heard the soft voice of Susan speaking inside her head.

“Malvina, let us mention something that might help Dr. Lowe understand why it must be a secret. Mrs. Greene cannot hide from the murderers when the truth is known. They will use her son to find her.” Malvina pleaded,

“Mrs. Greene cannot go away. She cannot hide anywhere! The murderers will use Little Jack to bring her to them. She has kept Little Jack at school so many years because she did not want Captain

Willard and his bummers to find her. Father knew about it! He kept us safe at Oak Crossroads. Now, the secret is almost out in the open. The murderers will be back, Dr. Lowe! They want all the paper.” Judith said,

“Malvina, don’t!” Dr. Lowe, looking directly at Judith, asked,

“So, that is why you refused to have the boy schooled here. Being in mortal danger is nothing new to you. The last twenty years? Good Lord! Both of you are putting me in an untenable situation as a physician. If we had the staff, I would assign somebody else to treat you.” Then, Malvina heard the voice of Susan say,

“We will say nothing about Jane. That means no mention of the coffin.” Dr. Lowe asked,

“Very well; what papers?” Judith said,

“I gave them to Colonel Wyche. Oh, no... Mrs. Wyche or Mr. Thomas must have them.” Slyly, the voice of Susan said to Malvina,

“She should tell him about Fred and her gentlemen admirers like Judge Coats; and let us not omit the other gentlemen who stood by while Senator Littlefield tried to strangle us. Then, there is the charming Mr. Cassidy. From the beginning, he had his eye on Jane. That will surely open the doctor’s eyes.” Judith said,

“There is a copy, Dr. Lowe. It is in this room.” Judith looked at Malvina, who responded with a smile, then said in an imploring tone,

“Help us.”

After Dr. Lowe and Elizabeth left the room, Malvina told Judith about the symbols she saw on the cloth lining inside the leather portfolio that contained the bonds. It was a print of playing cards arranged in what appeared to be a random order. Judith never noticed it. Malvina, however, committed it to memory; on recalling it, she realized it was a code. Was this a clue or something else?

February 24, 1882. Jane Wyche waited impatiently for Mr. Thomas to arrive and take her to the hospital for her daily visit. Though she detested the tyrant, his company was preferable to being

alone. It was only after the Colonel's death that Jane noticed the huge muscular man that seemed to appear out of nowhere and follow her. He was clean-shaven and well dressed, but something about him scared her. If he realized her gaze was directed towards him, he would tip his hat and smile graciously. Though she was aware that that a detective killed her husband's assassin, she had only read about him in the *Messenger*. She was sure that the man following her was the detective Cassidy. Who else could he be? The daily trips Jane took to visit Malvina allowed her refuge from the unpleasantness she felt every time she was startled by the sudden appearance of the man. Her heart would pound, and she felt like she could hardly breathe at the sight of him. It was wearing her down.

Jane suspected that Mr. Cassidy figured out that she buried the small coffin under the bridge. Likely, he suspected where the bonds were now hidden. She pondered one question over and again, "Who was he working for?" Obviously, he worked for the railroad. That made little sense to her. The crime she had committed, if it was a crime, was a matter for the city police. Jane, unlike anybody caught up in the terror, suspected that the assassinations had been engineered by somebody in the county political machine. Perhaps, it was the silent clan of the elite that had jealously guarded the levers of power in Gilridge from the beginning? Whatever the case may be; she was certain Mr. Thomas was not involved. Without doubt, he knew that the Colonel had the bonds. If he wanted them, they were in the Colonel's safe, and he knew that she could open it. She was wrong on that point. Thomas did not know that the Colonel had the bonds, nor was he aware that his trusted colleague acquired the accompanying document from Mrs. Greene. It was also in the safe, but Jane knew nothing about it. Had she read it, she would not be entertaining thoughts of cashing in the bonds.

When Mr. Thomas arrived, he immediately announced his intentions to send Malvina away from Gilridge.

"Mrs. Wyche, you will be pleased to know that I plan to move Malvina to a rather scenic location where she can recover. It is not a sanitarium, but a large estate with gardens and beautiful walks. It sits high atop a ridge, remote and inaccessible as the Amazon."

“So, when should I expect this exile to begin?”

“No, Mrs. Wyche, I will tell you when the time comes.”

“Then, why tell me at all?”

“So you can have your bags packed, dear lady. I intend for this move to transpire without undue attention. I would prefer to have that gentleman standing outside occupied with something else.” Jane asked,

“Nonsense, he works for the railroad. If you really wanted to see him bothering somebody else, he would be at it right now.”

“True enough, but who would keep an eye on you? It seems to be you have a penchant for playing monkeyshines. Pray tell, exactly what was your purpose in burying that old child’s coffin under the Fourth Avenue Bridge? Were you simply so starved for amusement that you needed to stir up the whole town with rumors of grave robbers?”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir? Does this Mr. Cassidy think that I was responsible for that mischief?”

“You do not have to tell me. Still, our friend outside is under the impression that there was something valuable in that box. Maybe, our beloved Malvina inherited it from her husband? There are those in our midst that covet a certain treasure from bygone days to the extreme of committing murder to get it back. I am aware that the late Mr. McAdams was a daring sort. Certainly, his wife told you stories?”

“Not that I recall, sir. I believe your detective friend is given to flights of fancy. Whatever you might think, we ladies have more pressing concerns on our minds. Let your friends carry on their search for buried treasure in other corners of the neighborhood. That said, would you be so kind as to take me to the hospital. We do not want Malvina fretting unnecessarily.

February 25, 1882. Malvina was moved to the dormitory on the hospital grounds where several of the young nurses resided. Dr. Lowe thought she would be safe and comfortable there since visitors

were not allowed inside. He also believed the company of the young ladies would lift her spirits. She transcribed the coded text from the inside of the portfolio she had committed to memory. Mrs. Greene shared in the work of trying to decode the text, but there appeared to be something amiss. The results did not make sense. Mr. Thomas thwarted any idea of keeping Judith and Malvina together. Dr. Greene went along with him. Soon, he regretted that decision.

Dr. Greene had not been long from seeing Judith off from the depot, when he was met with frantic cries from the nurse Elizabeth as he entered the drive to the hospital,

“Somebody placed a hatbox on Mrs. McAdams’ bed, and it contained a noose!”

“No! Not here!”

On entering her room in the nurse’s dormitory, he found Malvina backed against the corner of the room staring at the hatbox. Dr. Lowe and three nurses crowded into the tiny bedroom trying to calm her. On seeing Dr. Greene, she pleaded,

“General, the enemy has come for me! We are no longer safe in this house! They would not give a second thought to hanging your daughters for hiding me!”

“Don’t run away, Malvina! We’ll take you far away from here! I have a carriage waiting! Please, take my hand!”

“She scrambled to his side, and then they rushed out to his buggy with the nurses following. Mr. Bacon, waiting with the buggy, was puzzled by everybody running out of the building. Anxiously, he asked,

“What happened?” Dr. Greene answered,

“The Yankees have breached our defenses! We have to evacuate our lady-folk!”

“I told you they would be back! I’ll need more than your buggy to take all of ‘em!”

While this “make believe” was going on Dr. Lowe made his way back to the hospital, then returned momentarily with a syringe. As

Malvina was about to climb into the buggy, Elizabeth grabbed her hand and pulled up the sleeve of her dressing gown, thus allowing Dr. Lowe to deliver an injection into her upper arm. Malvina cried,

“General, I’ve been shot!” He said,

“Hold her arm, Elizabeth!”

Elizabeth climbed onto the buggy holding Malvina’s arm tightly, and instructed Mr. Bacon to drive. It took several trips around the hospital grounds before Malvina drifted into passivity. Gently, the nurses walked her up to the empty third floor of the hospital. It would be her new quarters until other arrangements could be made to insure her safety.

The police were summoned to her room in the dormitory, and they questioned the nurses about the comings and goings that morning. No one noticed anything out of the ordinary. Jane arrived for her usual visit to find this spasm of chaos in full swing. Walking into her room, the first thing to catch her eye was the noose. Her shriek could have mortified a banshee! Immediately every eye cast an accusing gaze upon her. Dr. Lowe, perhaps more than most, considered her a villainess to the core. Who else but she would send a noose in a hat box? Dr. Greene, who returned from attending to Malvina, found himself in the middle of an interrogation. Assuming a more open minded stance, he said,

“Constable, what do you think happened here?”

“Who, other than the hospital staff, has access to the dormitory?” Dr. Lowe replied,

“The nurses cannot entertain visitors. Other than the housekeeper, Mrs. Wyche was the only exception.” Dr. Greene asked,

“Where is the hat that belongs with that hatbox?” After a protracted search, a policeman found it under the bed. The constable remarked,

“Now, isn’t that strange? All they needed to do was to bring in a length of five feet of common hemp cord, fashion a hangman’s knot, and make the switch while she was out of the room. Tossing the hat under the bed, the culprit could make a quick retreat through the hallway.” Noticing that everyone was looking suspiciously at Jane, Dr. Greene came to her defense.

“I saw Mrs. McAdams in her hat yesterday afternoon. Since Mrs. Wyche just arrived, she did not bring the rope.” Dr. Lowe snapped back at Dr. Greene,

“Who might have done the mischief, if not a nurse, the housekeeper or Mrs. Wyche?” He answered,

“Not Malvina’s ‘friend?’” The constable said,

“We could start by looking for an unlocked door or open window.”

It did not take long because it was still cold. Looking outside the window, they saw an overturned bucket beneath. A lively discussion ensued between the doctors, starting with Dr. Greene.

“Someone inside left the window unlatched, and a person, likely a man, crawled in and placed the noose while everybody was at breakfast.” Furious, Dr. Lowe asked,

“Somebody! Who?”

“I suppose, if a man of average size and weight stood on that bucket, it would leave an impression in the ground below. Have we considered that?” The assemblage of police, hospital staff, and Mrs. Wyche went outside the building to examine the bucket. Dr. Greene said,

“Let us reason through this. This constable appears to be an average-size man. Let’s carefully move the bucket to the right and let him stand on it.” The constable did as the doctor asked, and then removed the bucket to view the impression. After that, a nurse remarked,

“It was not a man.” Glaring at Mrs. Wyche and the nurses, Dr. Lowe tightened his lips. Dr. Greene said,

“Now, let us move the bucket to the left side of the original circle, and we will have Iris stand on it. She is, by my estimate, of average size and weight for a woman.” The impression that resulted from Iris standing on the bucket was not as deep as the one produced by the policeman, but it was deeper than the original. Dr. Greene slapped his knee and said,

“Ah, yes! It’s a trick. This was placed there, and the person who did it applied forced down by the weight of their upper body thinking we wouldn’t question what it appeared to be. So, they could have come in with a key? Why the bucket? To make it look as though one of the nurses was in on the deed.” Dr. Lowe then asked the nurses to present their keys. None were missing. Then, the constable asked to look at one of them. After a brief examination, he announced,

“This is for an old-style lock and not a very good one. You can make a skeleton key easily that will unlock the door. However, you might not have to do that since there are many of these locks in town; all of them open with a couple or three keys. Yes, any experienced policeman will tell you – not only here, but anywhere. Thieves are very fond of this type of door lock.”

During the discussion, most present were engrossed in the unraveling of the mystery. Iris glanced over at Mrs. Wyche and noticed the color had drained from her face. She whispered to Dr. Greene,

“Dr. Greene! Mrs. Wyche is pale as a ghost.” He walked to her and gently asked,

“Who is trying to frighten you?” Unnerved, she cried out,

“That Mr. Cassidy frightens me... sometimes... most of the time; he is a damnable nuisance!” The constable told her,

“Mr. Cassidy is a railroad detective. You will have to take that up with Mr. Thomas.”

“I have reached my wits’ end! Believe me, I would do nothing like this to anybody, much less my cousin!” Dr. Lowe tried to calm her by saying,

“The police were merely asking you general questions.”
Disconsolately, she replied,

“I saw it in your faces!”

Dr. Greene was more sympathetic towards her. He asked Dr. Lowe whether he would consider moving Malvina back into the hospital within sight of the staff at all times. Jane left frustrated to the verge of tears, but held them back bravely. By late afternoon, Mr. Thomas appeared with an armed guard to protect Malvina during the day; and during the night, he was relieved by two more. After her shock wore off, she was returned to her room in the unfinished section of the second floor.

The events of the morning left Dr. Greene mentally exhausted; the prospect of taking on the night shift for two days seemed Herculean. Excluding Malvina, the hospital had sixteen patients; most were railroad workers who had suffered injuries in the yards over the week. The remainder included a case of pneumonia, a man recovering from a gunshot wound to the shoulder, a woman who took a fall from a ladder, and a young boy who was kicked by a horse. Dr. Wilson could not handle this much work alone. With all three doctors on-site and eight nurses split between two shifts, the hospital could manage for a few days as long as the unexpected remained a concern rather than a reality. Pacing about on the hospital porch at nightfall, Dr. Greene puffed on a cigar as the wheels of his mind spun on relentlessly pondering his multiple dilemmas.

At about the same time that Dr. Greene was trying to solve the mystery of the noose in the hat box, his wife was settling into her life on the run in the guise of a correspondent for the Central Railroad with the *nom de plume* Mrs. William Beech. Mr. Thomas set up this arrangement per the late Colonel's instructions. Her protector for the duration of her adventure, Captain Willard's man Carlton Kerr, was finding out how entertaining she could be. The moment that the train moved away from Union Depot, her worries melted away. They were riding alone in the superintendent's private car. James Rouse, Colonel Wyche's successor, refurbished the car to look like a drawing

room, replete with upholstered chairs of the most tasteful style. Gone were the piles of reports, drawings, and the worn couch where the Colonel frequently took his naps. It was now rather pleasant, and it gave Mrs. Greene the feeling of being at home. The train was comprised of a locomotive, tender, old mail car, and the private car. Armed guards hid in the mail car. After the private car was attached to the first available northbound passenger train at Orchard Depot, the guards returned to Gilridge. From then on, Mrs. Greene and Mr. Kerr were joined by other detectives from Willard's agency including a lady.

"My name is Mrs. William Beech, and you are Jonathan, my son. Do I have a first name?"

"Pick one you will remember."

"Minerva."

"Minerva Beech?"

"The goddess of wisdom might provide me with a measure of her chief attribute to temper my impetuosity. This entire string of tragic events could have been avoided if I was a tad wiser and a little less clever."

"Tell me, Mrs. Greene, how did you escape from the woman who tried to drown you?"

"Oh, you want to know my secret?"

"Yes, I do."

"Seeing as you are my protector, I will indulge that request. Underneath my hat, hidden deep within my hair, are two little tools I fashioned myself. I have a proclivity for fixing watches and clocks. This skill, I picked up on my own by reading – I had nobody to teach me. There are many fine little tools I have made for that joyful pastime. However, the tools in my hair were made for opening locks."

"Could I see them?"

"Certainly. Let me remove my hat... would you mind holding it. I don't want to get it dirty."

“Not at all.”

“See, right here... can you see them?”

“Yes. From the article I read in the newspaper; they served you well. But I am curious how often you find yourself in need of these tools?”

“Here, let me take them out so you can have a closer look... to answer your question, I have kept a set of these tools in my hair every day since the war. This is only one of the several sets I have made. Sometimes, they get lost. Other than practicing to keep my skills up, my misadventure with that little witch was the only time they have been put to use since the war.”

“So, you are always prepared for the worse?” Seriously, Judith exclaimed,

“No, I am not always prepared. That frightful woman was set upon killing me in a horrible way. She wanted me to disappear without a trace at the bottom of the river. The chain locked around my waist would hold me at the bottom until my bones fell to pieces. They would search but never find me. That’s what I thought about in the rowboat. She kept me waiting until dark with a gun to the back of my head. Across the room, I could see my bag. There was a revolver in it, but she never gave me an opportunity to reach for it.”

“You have it now?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Mr. Willard ought to hire you on with the agency after all of this. You would make a fine addition. We have lady detectives.”

“Mr. Kerr, I sincerely hope that Captain Willard does not think ill of me. I exasperated him considerably during the war!”

“Yes, you did! He said you escaped from him four times! How did you do that?”

“Remember, it was my duty to escape if I was caught. Actually, it was three times. The fourth time I was rescued by Colonel Wyche and my friends. It was really a clever bluff! They convinced the men escorting me to the depot they had a 12-pounder loaded with canister

aimed at them. It was really empty and had a crack in the muzzle. Otherwise, Captain Willard had me fair and square. Nevertheless, I always held Captain Willard in high regard and never had a single unkind word or thought about him. I told him that to his face the last time he caught me. I want you to remember that, because I meant it.”

“I know that! He told me all about you. He said all his bluster, particularly the part about wanting to shoot you, was so much play acting to scare you into giving up your secrets. Then you would talk him into making concessions and he would drop the act.”

“Yes... but I have a talent for that.”

“Your husband must spend many an hour bragging on you.”

“He brags on me... that is, for my humor... and my singing, and my cooking – which I am proud of; however, he never seems to eat when I have it ready, so it is always cold – and my painting. I kept all my stories about the war from him and extracted a pledge from all his friends not to say a word about it.”

“Would he not approve?”

“Not that. I needed to protect my boy and perhaps, my husband as well. Since the end of the war, there have been several attempts on my life – all thwarted by my former associates.”

“Does he understand that?”

“He does, I suppose; he forgave me for the deception... I hope. Let us talk about something else. When might I see Captain Willard again?”

“He is eager to see you. It pleases him to know that both of you are on the same side for a change. Considering the situation, we will not know until he wants us to know.”

“I understand... Now, I think we should talk about you, Mr. Kerr – I presume I need to get used to calling you Jonathan?”

“That means I have to get used to calling you Mother, doesn’t it?”

“I am afraid so...”

“Minerva?”

“Mother is fine... an idea just struck me!”

“What is that?”

Judith reached for the bag at her side and opened it. First, she carefully removed her revolver and sat it down properly by her side on the settee; then she removed the folded paper that Malvina gave her.

“There is a remarkable lady whom I taught in Gilridge named Malvina McAdams, the daughter of Colonel Wyche. She has a brilliant mind that can unravel many problems, and she is gifted with a memory that records everything written or printed. I am sure that Captain Willard has told you about the lost bonds and the various documents? Malvina memorized a code printed on the lining of the leather case that held them. As of late, she has turned her mind to solving the code. It consists of tiny pictures of playing cards, some oriented in different directions, and perfectly spaced in one even square each side. The squares on each page are of distinct sizes, but on every page, the symbols are arranged in a square. Unlike most playing cards, they have a top and bottom.” After studying the transcribed code, Kerr said,

“So, on each page, the number of characters across is the same as the number down?”

“Yes..., Jonathan.”

“That number must be important to deciphering the code..., Mother.” Judith laughed, then continued,

“Malvina deduced what the symbols mean. They represent letters and numbers as you might expect. I have the primer she created here, but she could not figure out how to use it.” Judith handed Carlton the code key. After reading it, he looked off into space pondering, and said,

“So, the numbers and symbols for the suits are only on one end of the card, not like a normal deck... four sides and four cardinal directions?”

“Yes! South is top, so you read those symbols placed that way in order from top to bottom. North is bottom, so you read bottom to top. East is left to right and west is right to left. I taught Latin and Greek, but I am also interested in other languages. Some of the oriental languages are sometimes written in columns and Hebrew is written right to left. Malvina’s education was cut short by the war; she was never exposed to these languages.” He said,

“So, there really isn’t a top of the page. You keep rotating the page as you read. But where do you start?” Judith answered,

“I don’t know. There is something she missed. In a lock, you cannot see the wards inside that prevent any key from turning, but there is always space in between to slip something through to open it.”

“I would say plenty of space, Mrs. Greene. There are twenty-six letters in the alphabet and ten digits, but there are fifty-two cards in the deck. That leaves sixteen holes divided into four ranked groups. I think we ought to pass this along to Captain Willard. Just off hand, something tells me that this code might not have anything to do with the bonds, the criminals that stole them, or you. This looks like something from the war. I wonder what sorts of secrets that our Mr. Thomas is keeping? Where is this Mrs. McAdams?”

“She is safe at County Hospital in Gilridge.”

CHAPTER FOUR

December 1, 1876. The gathering of the leaders of the *Kinsfolk* took place shortly after nine in the evening. The whole affair assumed the guise of a family gathering. Prior to their secret conference, those assembled attended service in the old church near Oak Crossroads Station. By early afternoon, the representatives of the various branches of the family – the directors as they called themselves – walked to the old school. On this occasion, the seven men convened their meeting in the chapel on the second floor. The pews and pulpit, all bolted down, were the only furnishings in the building that remained after the school was closed. After a brief discussion on the sale of timber, Osborn Guthrie, the patriarch presiding over the several clans, told the directors that each family must select one or more of their sons or daughters for inclusion in their clandestine society known as the “gray hoods”. Inductees must be able to keep their activities secret, even from their spouses. He went on to explain how the use of hirelings failed on many occasions, and rapacious spouses such as Sarah Huffman put their order at risk. Another member of their family, William Grundy Littlefield, was loyal to an associate of Sarah named Fred McAdams and a rather dangerous woman who confounded the Yankees named Judith Greene. Though he was useful, Guthrie warned those assembled to guard against allowing the senator access to the secret proceedings of the families. By some means, McAdams acquired bonds stolen by an unauthorized faction led by two renegade brothers, Cyrus and Davis Huffman – both deceased; he also had in his possession an incriminating letter that implicated members of the Huffman, Guthrie, and Littlefield families. McAdams was killed, but efforts to persuade his partner, Mrs. Greene, to surrender the letter and the bonds failed because the men hired for the job were incompetent.

“Gentlemen, I am certain that you recall that unpleasant affair with the Huffman boys and their band of common miscreants. Our problems continued when Sarah became avaricious after her husband's untimely death. Hungry for a meager reward in gold, she let go a fortune in bonds rather than accept our protection.

Apparently, the outbreak of war thwarted her scheme. Then, she disappeared from the face of the Earth... or so we thought. I do not know when or by what means she transmitted a communication to a certain Fred McAdams. Nonetheless, when he approached me after the close of the war with an offer to purchase the bonds for half their value, it was apparent to me that he learned of our existence from Sarah. We hired men to follow him. Frequently, he came to Oak Crossroads to meet with a well-known woman from Gilridge, Judith Greene. On several occasions, we hired men to abduct her; each time, the plot failed – we will certainly try again. Then, quite by chance, McAdams' wife was visiting with Captain Littlefield. This pleasant, but somewhat strange lady, read for the family and their friends a story she composed. It was a thinly veiled chronicle of the wartime exploits of McAdams, Mrs. Greene, Senator Littlefield, and a school girl that most definitely was her. The story mentioned that an 'agent for the government in Richmond' was shot when he blundered into a Union raid. Before dying, the gentleman passed on his pouch to the heroic leader of the spies – obviously, McAdams. This pouch contained a fortune in English bonds and a letter that listed traitors to the cause. In Mrs. McAdams' story, the hero tells the lady that helps him to hide the pouch – the lady must be Mrs. Greene. On the remote chance that Sarah exposed our activities in this letter, whether it exists or not, we decided to arrange an accident for Mr. McAdams. Now, we have our eyes on Mrs. Greene again. I hope we can take her alive and force her to hand over the letter and bonds. Unlike McAdams, I presume she is too cautious to do anything with her hidden treasure. In the story penned by Malvina McAdams, during the closing days of the war, the lady 'buried the bonds in a church cemetery inside a beautiful child's coffin'. She will lead our men to the spot if she tries to retrieve it. That said, we must consider at some point getting rid of her and her associates... including Mrs. McAdams – after we take possession of the items."

Without a doubt, Mr. Guthrie read too much into Malvina's fiction. The letter was from Newton & LeQuire to Mr. Thomas. The list contained the names of investors and employees, not traitors or conspirators. McAdams never communicated with Sarah Huffman.

Living under an assumed name, she travelled the South during the war years, eventually dying of yellow fever. McAdams approached Guthrie because he and Jeremiah Littlefield, was included on the list of investors. It would take some time before the directors learned about Mr. Thomas. The entire string of murders began with assumptions and misinterpretations: so that her family would listen, Malvina disguised her record of the past as fiction; yet elements of artistic license were construed as fact. McAdams greed exposed him, and ultimately, his friends. Had he returned the bonds to Thomas, nothing would have happened. The Huffman brothers were killed during the war, so the investigation was dead. Furthermore, the damning evidence that everybody was trying to find did not exist.

February 28, 1882. The appearance of the noose in Malvina's hatbox on Friday past caused Malvina to break from reality, or at least, her present reality... completely. The experience was so traumatic for her that Mr. Thomas postponed his plan to move Malvina and Jane to a remote mountain estate. Malvina needed medical supervision, and the best he could do to insure her safety was to hire armed watchmen to prevent unauthorized people from gaining access to her. After Malvina recovered from the initial shock, she spent her days in her room writing stories in her little leather bound journals. Four days after the incident, she wanted to read what she had written to Dr. Lowe and the nurse, Elizabeth.

"Is this about Susan, the lady spying during the war?"

"Oh, yes! Her adventures continue, as I am sure you know. On this occasion I will tell you how Susan broke the Yankee secret code." Malvina commenced the reading. The fictional Susan discovered an intercepted message of the murdered leader of the spies, Mr. McDonald. The code was intricate and roughly inspired by card games. She labored for days to solve it. The fictional Susan hit on the idea it might be grounded as such while playing a game of whist with the wife of a lighthouse tender.

"She had noticed that the tiny pictures of playing cards in the coded message were arranged toward the compass and their layout on the page was a perfect square. Also, the card symbols were not mirrored like most decks. If you turned the page on its side, all the

symbols in that direction could be read in order; when one rotated the page, the text continued with upright characters in that direction.” Dr. Lowe asked,

“How would you know where to start?” Malvina explained,

“The letters and numbers of the code used thirty-six cards. The remaining sixteen cards were used in ascending order by rank of the suit at the starting and ending points, four codes for four sides. That meant, in order that the words might be assembled in order, the square must be rotated in the next direction at the end of the line – the whole square is rotated twice!” He remarked,

“Ah, that is clever!”

“Would you like to see? I have four decks of cards.”

“Yes, I would!” Elizabeth asked,

“Why do you need four decks?” Dr. Lowe asked,

“Four directions?” Malvina laugh shyly and said,

“I would need many decks if I want to create sentences. I am only going with one word that does not use the same letters twice in four directions.” Elizabeth was curious as to where Malvina acquired four decks of playing cards. Dr. Lowe answered,

“When she asked, I told Mr. Bacon to pick them up from town when he went for provisions. He was curious about it. He said, ‘Are you fixin’ to start up a gambling hall?’” Elizabeth laughed, and said,

“He is such a sweet man. Iris likes him much; you know?”

At the table, Malvina selected cards from the deck and arranged them in a square. The cards appeared to be oriented in the four cardinal directions randomly. She turned to Dr. Lowe, then said,

“Of the cards not used for letters or numbers, you find the lowest card of the highest ranking suit to read, skipping the cards that are not positioned in the identical direction, until you find the next highest card of the same suit. You are reading right to left, then the following line, left to right, and the next, right to left, until you

reach the first end card. Thereafter, you rotate the page counter clockwise. The cards placed face up on the table spell “Jane” in all four directions. No numbers or letters are shared when the four directions cross. The letters of a word are spread out all over the square in each direction with the crossings, and the stopping and ending points.” Dr. Lowe asked,

“So, tell us Malvina, what is the message that Susan deciphered?”

“The first square reads ‘Worth fifty-five thousand pounds sterling in Bermuda – Charles Lassiter, Esq.’, and that is as far as Susan could work out before she was forced to flee. The Yankees had cut the railroad to the town and she feared capture as they advanced. She stitched the papers into her dress.”

“Can you write out the full encoded message for me?”

“Without deciphering it?” He said,

“Oh, so you need to decipher the code before using it in a work of fiction? How fascinating, Malvina! Could you prepare an exact copy of the coded document for me? It would be an enjoyable pastime to decode it myself. Mrs. Greene gave me a copy of the primer you prepared.”

“Indeed! I can do that for you, Dr. Lowe... where is she? Did Captain Willard capture her again?” Puzzled, Elizabeth asked,

“The Yankee officer in your story?”

“Captain Willard is the devil himself!”

“I’m confused, Malvina. Do you mean to say that Captain Willard is a real person?”

“Yes! Dr. Lowe met him!” Lowe, now confused, asked,

“Captain Willard?” Malvina recounted Dr. Lowe’s meeting with Senator Grundy at the hospital.

“Remember the day we took the walk? You wanted to take Susan... no; you wanted to take me to see the hospital. There was a gentleman, all smiling, that took my hand and looked into my eyes,

and then... I don't know what happen next. 'That was the devil!' Dismayed, he asked,

"Senator Grundy?" Elizabeth was completely confused.

"Oh... but I still don't understand." Dr. Lowe explained to Elizabeth that Malvina referred to every evil man as a Captain Willard – it was a code of her own. He then asked,

"Malvina, who wants to hurt Mrs. Greene?"

"The 'little witch.'"

"That's what Mrs. Greene called the woman who shot her. I heard her say that." Malvina continued.

"I don't know why, but I can imagine such things as a story. Say, the 'little witch' is from Charleston, but she is not one of us. She is a traitor! Her gentleman friend is dead. Sergeant Cassidy and his soldiers shot him when he killed Susan's father, and I think that was just punishment. She wanted to revenge his death by murdering 'the most dangerous woman on the Earth.' Dr. Lowe asked,

"Most dangerous woman on the Earth? Who is she, Malvina?"

"Certainly, you know, Dr. Lowe. Everybody who becomes entangled in her web of deception, friend or foe, will die a violent death. She does not mean for this to happen, but it happens. She hid the treasure they all covet and death follows them – it is a pretty paper! No, not money. They are called one-thousand pound bonds. They look like engravings with pretty pictures, and on them were printed 'pay to the bearer on demand the sum of one thousand pounds.'" Astonished, Dr. Lowe exclaimed,

"What?"

"That's right, Dr. Lowe! I assume that is a treasure. I do not know how much it would be, but there are quite a few like the first." He asked,

"So the 'most dangerous woman on the Earth' has these bonds?"

“No, she hid them and now they are gone. I am not sure how the rest of the story will go. I will let you read it when I’m done. It is good, don’t you think? Jane seems to like it. She was very excited to hear a portion of it the first time.”

Mrs. Greene underestimated Malvina’s ability to figure out the code. Soon, Dr. Lowe was the first to know what was encoded in the fabric liner of the leather case that Malvina had committed to memory. Would it lead to the murderers? Well, not quite; still, it was something unexpected. Unfortunately, there was no way to prove that it was anything more than the product of Malvina’s bountiful imagination. Dr. Lowe asked,

“Would you mind reading your story for my friend Dr. Lovejoy?” With a broad smile, she said,

“Of course, Dr. Lowe!”

February 28, 1882. Dr. John Wilson did not understand the animosity that Dr. Lowe nurtured towards Mrs. Wyche. She was well-spoken, stately, and exceptionally beautiful. Nothing in her words or actions, even when her husband lay dead before her on that painful night, belied anything other than strength of character. Suffering long with the burden of her cousin’s affliction, Jane projected nothing less than saintly goodness. How could Dr. Lowe treat her so callously? He was at a loss. Dr. Wilson was in the minority. Jane was one of those rare cursed individuals who were mistrusted and despised without cause. This reaction to her was almost instinctual with no measure of reflection. It was not a recent development, rather a cloud that hung over her since childhood. When flattery came, she was inclined to appreciate it, even if it was disingenuous. At the bottom of Rose Street, the “saintly” Mrs. Wyche was preparing to visit the hospital when her housekeeper delivered to her a note in an unaddressed envelope. On opening it, she was much surprised to find it had been written by that pest, Mr. Cassidy. Reading, she found it chivalrous in its own peculiar way.

“Dearest Lady... it is with my deepest regret I must inform you that other duties have called me away. I am a detective by profession, and the several unpleasant occurrences of the past few days have

prompted my superiors to assign me to those investigations. With all my heart, I hope my presence during the last little while has not caused you too much grief? Had the choice been mine, the investigation would have been undertaken in a more discrete and gentlemanly fashion. You would have not even noticed my presence in the slightest. Be assured my report contains nothing that will bring dishonor to your reputation or that of your beloved cousin. However, know this, dear lady; your pursuit was my great, albeit fruitless pleasure. With deepest admiration, I remain your obedient servant, Cassidy.” She said to herself,

“What an amusing note. Actually, he is trying to charm me...”

She went to the window to see if he was still outside. He was there. On seeing her at the window, he tipped his hat. She found herself waving good-bye without being aware of it. Realizing this, she drew back her hand and frowned at him. Laughing to herself, she marveled at his audacious attempt to charm her into, what, a confession? No, not at all! He was merely being witty. At that moment, he hardly seemed a nuisance at all. Jane continued the oppressive routine of donning the black garments she was sentenced to wear for at least a full year. Fine as they were, considering her station, she did not like being the object of pity. Her sister was a perpetual object of pity and that’s all she would ever be. Nobody would bother with her otherwise! Jane’s loss had been overshadowed by all the attention directed towards Malvina. The way to gain the advantage was to join in on the chorus of pity for that unfortunate creature. Her prospects for escaping Mr. Thomas’ control rested upon a plan she hoped to set in motion. She could persuade James Rouse to lend his assistance. Mr. Rouse, her husband’s successor, seemed to be the only person that exhibited any sympathy towards her. Unlike the icy Mr. Thomas, whom she did not trust in any degree, Mr. Rouse appeared sincerely willing to help Jane achieve what she wanted even though she had not articulated her intentions. Possessing the bearer bonds and eager to be rid of them, she planned a surreptitious visit to New York. The price the bonds might fetch would free her from the clause in the Colonel’s will that linked her well-being to a lifelong obligation to attend to Malvina. Mr. Thomas,

the executor of the trust, told her in no uncertain terms, that he would not permit Jane to put Malvina out of the way and forgotten in an institution for the insane. He did not think she was insane, merely given to “spells of hysteria” that could be controlled by a healthy regime of good food, exercise, and removal to some tranquil retreat in the mountains where the “harmful stimulations of society could not penetrate.” Jane was required to be close at hand to provide sisterly love and guidance... or risk being cut off. She agreed with Thomas regarding what should be done with Malvina. Rather than undertake fruitless efforts to help her to overcome the problems that living in society presented, removing her to a place where society could not get to her to present problems was expedient and rational. She could read, write stories, daydream, and indulge her eccentricities without attracting notice. What bothered Jane about this proposition was that she would be exiled to the far reaches of the hinterland with her!

March 2, 1882. After sunset on the second of March, the figure of what appeared to be a young officer from a merchant ship made his way from the company docks of the railroad. Carrying a bundle with a shoulder strap much like a swag and toting a worn carpet bag, the mariner followed the tracks from the lower yards up to the inclined plane. He wore rough leather gloves, and puffed on a fancy Meerschaum pipe. Hardly anybody noticed him, but those railroad men who encountered the young fellow in passing thought him a gangly boy in an ill-fitting uniform. Hopefully, he might live to grow into it someday. His jaundiced complexion suggested the boy might not make it to manhood.

Upon reaching the Old Union Depot in the upper yards, he was met by the conductor of a freight train given special instructions to permit him to ride along for a reduced fare the full length along the line. It was not atypical to allow men from the railroad’s steamboat line to ride the freights for cheap. The men, however, had to patrol for tramps boarding the cars at every stop in exchange. The burly old conductor sized up the young man as little more than a boy, but gave him a beat-up rifle to tote for the duration of the trip. Then, he told him to stand upon the platform of the “dog house” the whole way. The young man was not a man at all, but Jane in disguise. She made

a partially successful appeal to Mr. Rouse. Regardless, he could not act on her behalf as she hoped, nor could he take leave from his duties to accompany her to New York. Jane had to make her way the best she could and sometimes as a man. Mrs. Greene would have marveled. It was a piece of trickery worthy of her admiration.

Jane made her way out of town through the lower yards of the depot disguised as a sailor in plain sight while Mr. Cassidy and Mr. Thomas conversed on the passenger platform above the inclined plane.

“It seems rather bold of you to stand out here in the open like this, Mr. Thomas. I consider you the last man on the killer's list.”

“I suppose so. That is, after you.” Cassidy asked,

“I don’t suppose you could tell me where Mrs. Greene has run off?”

“No, I cannot.”

“Or will not? Is that it, Mr. Thomas?”

“Whatever you like, sir. Regardless, you should be looking for the woman who tried to drown her, not torment Mrs. Wyche. What do you think she knows? She is nothing more than a self-serving mantrap that has little regard for high principals.” Cassidy replied,

“The Colonel must have thought differently.”

“The Colonel was dying. He had the right to one last adventure with womankind.”

“Lovejoy didn’t tell me that.”

“Nobody knows, except me. Perhaps, his daughter, because she would notice the changes. Dr. Lovejoy likely didn’t look much further than the obvious, the gunshot wounds.” Cassidy said,

“I bet Dr. Greene knew.”

“Perhaps, but that is moot, Mr. Cassidy. Now, if you are so concerned about my safety, which I suppose you should be since we are in the same stew, take a look around. Let me direct your attention to the gentleman standing about ten feet from us. He is one of the several private detectives who haunt the depot day and night. All of them are armed. Best of all, they keep a sharp eye out for people who come to watch and wait. I pay them, not the railroad.”

“I do not think the woman will be back.”

“No, but sometimes soon, a new partner in crime will arrive to replace the one you shot. He will be much the same, a man with no identity. One who travels with the least baggage – that is, a changing of clothes and the tools of the trade.” Cassidy asked,

“What makes you think the woman couldn’t act alone?”

“She did not do so well with Mrs. Greene.”

“Mr. Thomas, there are not too many men who could do better if they came up against that lady. Our dearly departed acquaintances grew up with her, as you recall; and all confirmed that a rough boy was hiding under the bows and ribbons.”

“Yes, she is quite the amazon. That, however, means little when the method might include poison or bullets.”

“Indeed! Then, why do you suppose she tried to murder Mrs. Greene differently? Thomas laughed, then said,

“It doesn’t matter. I am sure another will join her. Our lady assassin, by my reckoning, is familiar with our fair city and its citizens. She is knowledgeable of the surrounding area and guides the hired killer. Yes, my friend, she is a local girl; and I suppose you will find her out in the county.”

“That makes sense, sir. She disappeared quickly after her attack on Mrs. Greene. An impressive swimmer, I must say!”

“Hiding in plain sight, so to speak”.

“Should it not be ‘a needle in a haystack’, Mr. Thomas?”

Not necessarily. She is only twenty-five, if that; I suppose, from one of the illustrious planter families. She is acting out of duty; protecting the family.” Cassidy asked,

“Why do you think that?”

“I assume there are no able-bodied young men left. She is protecting the family honor and legacy; surely, the family land and wealth as well.

“And what other parties are involved?”

“I presume that they do not know what we know. Eventually, it will be all out in the open, Mr. Cassidy. I have set a trap for them... we are bait.”

March 3, 1882. On Friday afternoon, Jane arrived at Orchard, the depot at the end of the line. Glad to be off the freight, she ducked into the woods to switch into the guise of a grimy old country woman. The brownish yellow grease acquired to tint her face and hands gave the lady a peculiar smell that blended with an unwashed condition to make her perfectly avoidable. She was safely solitary in the back of the cars all the way to Norfolk. Before boarding the steam packet to Baltimore, she cleaned off the smelly grime and visited a dry good shop, purchasing several nice dresses for her trip at sea. Jane was almost certain that none of the Gilridge crowd would travel this route since most of the city’s commercial intercourse took place with Charleston, Columbia, Raleigh, Norfolk, Petersburg, and Richmond. Those traveling further than these places usually went by rail. Jane missed her Friday visit to Malvina, but it did not cause alarm. She complained about not feeling well on her last visit and needed to rest for a few days. The housekeeper was instructed to tell anyone that came to visit that she was ill with a fever.

March 6, 1882. The steamboat took Jane from Norfolk by way of Chesapeake Bay to Baltimore. She could sleep in comfort one night before boarding the train for Philadelphia. By Monday morning, she was in the office of an attorney arranging to have half the bonds sold and an account set up in her name. Mr. Rouse contacted the lawyer to assist her with the redemption of the bonds

prior to her leaving Gilridge. In New York, she wasted no time. Accomplishing her task in a single day, Jane disappeared into busy Pine Street on foot. She planned to return by way of Richmond on the railroad.

Malvina was up early that Monday morning waiting for Dr. Lowe to visit her as he made his morning examinations of the patients. She was always the last since most of the unfinished second floor was unoccupied. Dr. Greene took the afternoon to evening shift after his wife's departure, so he would visit Malvina before leaving for home. She was in reasonably good health, having recovered rapidly from her surgery. Mr. Thomas thought the time was right to move her and Jane away from Gilridge.

March 10, 1882. Jane gradually curtailed her daily visits to Malvina in anticipation of her adventure, so it hardly seemed unusual for Jane not to come visiting during the first three days. Nevertheless, after the fourth day, Dr. Lowe was starting to think that Jane was neglecting her. By the sixth day, he was certain that she had abandoned Malvina altogether. When he called at the Wyche Mansion, the tight-lipped housekeeper told him that she was seized by awful headaches and went to Warren for the hot springs. This was not what Jane instructed her to say, but it worked. Dr. Lowe accepted this for the time being, but returned again after her non-appearance a few days later.

Jane became intoxicated by the ease in which she could move about freely. Without falling under the watchful gaze of paternal eyes, there was nothing stopping her. She contemplated making a permanent break by going west or to Canada. However, as she drifted south, it was becoming apparent that she had overstayed her time considerably. By now, the helpful Mr. Rouse was likely thinking he had made a terrible mistake, and might expose her secret out of concern about her safety. At Fredericksburg and Richmond, she sent telegrams to Rouse telling him she was on her way, and made the critical mistake of addressing them to the "Superintendent of the

Central Railroad,” thus allowing them to be handled by Rouse’s staff before he read them. Running parallel to this simmering pot of trouble, Dr. Lowe finally had enough of what he perceived to be the “outright neglect and abandonment” of Malvina. He went directly to Mr. Thomas.

Plans were set in motion to send Malvina and her wayward sister to the remote estate called Bartram’s Knob in the Appalachian Mountains not far from the Tennessee line. This would be an exile of an extreme sort, far from any town or railroad stop. It did not take long for Thomas to discover that Rouse had knowledge of Jane’s secret adventures, though the superintendent never let slip the true purpose of her mission. Thomas berated him in fearsome fashion for being manipulated by such a mischief making woman. Rouse defended her actions as being a necessary respite from the overwhelming burden of her responsibilities. This made him seem all the more a fool in Thomas’ eyes, because he never considered her honest or trustworthy. There was little substance to support the animosity that he felt towards Jane. Her forthright nature, daring, and physicality by itself would not have prompted such intense feelings; it was only in contrast to Malvina that she appeared self-serving – perhaps, without thinking, they expected it.

Jane purchased a new morbid black dress in Petersburg, so she would arrive back in Gilridge in the proper attire. Having been gone for a week, she was sure there would be a welcoming committee. Nevertheless, there was a sense of great satisfaction in having pulled off the deception thoroughly. So, she was caught sneaking off alone for a holiday? What a wicked widow she was! If her keepers could only imagine the things she did, they might surely think her insane – a rigorous adventure on trains, steamboats, stagecoaches, and on foot. Even the unpleasant sensations of shivering in the open air, walking alone on muddy country roads, sleeping out of doors under the stars, being rained upon, and getting utterly filthy had been exhilarating. With her bond fortune now banked; she had an escape route always at hand. At Orchard, Jane was met by two of the detectives whom Mr. Thomas hired, Mr. Lane and Mr. Cole. Their

mission was to escort Jane safely back to Gilridge. On meeting her on the platform, Mr. Lane exclaimed,

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Wyche.” She asked,

“Do I know you, sir?”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Charles Lane. Mr. Thomas sent me here to serve as your escort back to Gilridge. This is my colleague, Mr. Ezra Cole.” Cole tipped his hat, then said,

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Wyche.”

“Likewise, Mr. Cole. It is something of an honor to have two gentlemen accompanying me home. That is, if I choose to return home.” Lane said,

“You can go where ever you like. However, if you plan to return to Gilridge, we must protect you.”

“Protect me from what, Mr. Lane?”

“Mr. Thomas has reason to believe that you are in danger.” Mr. Cole added,

“With good cause, madam.”

“Perhaps that is true. However, I cannot give myself over to fear because some fiend that may or may not decide to kill me today, tomorrow, or next week might accomplish his ends. All of us die sooner or later.” Cordially, he replied,

“Mr. Thomas prefers that you live long and die in your own bed naturally.”

“I am sure that he did not say that; but I suppose thinking kindly is not beyond the limitations of his soul. Nevertheless, your company ought to prove refreshing for a while.” Cole said,

“The train for Gilridge leaves in an hour.”

“Very well, we will converse. Let us take a seat.” Jane and her escorts found a comfortable bench in the station near a large coal stove.”

“Gentlemen, do you have a little demon in your thoughts?”
Puzzled, Mr. Cole asked,

“Demon? What do you mean, Mrs. Wyche?”

“I know it sounds like an amusing question. Let me say it another way. Do you have a temptation to risk?” Lane answered,

“I suppose, since we are hired detectives, we must have a natural propensity to take risks. Is that what you mean?”

“Not exactly, gentlemen. Let me give you an example. Shortly after the train left the station on the way to Richmond, I stepped out onto the platform of the car with the conductor. The thought struck me to descend to the bottom step of the platform so I could stand on the edge as the train raced through the countryside. One misstep would send me toppling to a certain death, but the compulsion to take the risk was difficult to banish from my mind. I knew trying would be next to impossible with the gentleman at my side; and even if he were not, my higher faculties would contain such an attempt.”
Contemplating her words for a moment, Mr. Cole said,

“From time to time, such thoughts cross my mind. I don’t call them the prodding’s of a demon. It is more like the urge to gamble.”
Mr. Lane added his thoughts.

“Being a student of natural history, I have my own ideas. I entertained the notion that there was a time in the distant past when such compulsions were useful. Perhaps, some ancient man or woman, tempted by an attractive cluster of berries, risked being poisoned by submitting to the unrelenting urge to taste them. In my study of plants, I acquired a considerable knowledge of the poisonous varieties. Some uncelebrated ancient woman or child likely died to give mankind that knowledge. Since in primitive societies of the modern world women still gather and prepare plant foods and medicines, it was more than likely that the first victims of self-poisoning were women.” Jane asked,

“Are you a college man, Mr. Lane?”

“Yes, Mrs. Wyche.” Cole enthusiastically noted,

“That, he is. His education is useful on occasions.”

“I thought to ask a gentleman about the murmuring of his inner demons, but assumed it would urge him to chase something down and kill it. Is that right, Mr. Lane?”

“How could any person in respectable society claim moral superiority if they thought such things, even though they never acted upon these urgings?” She laughed, then said,

“Perhaps, the voice of the inner demon is a random cipher of no moral consequence, sir?” Cole smiled, then asked,

“Are you always this philosophical, Mrs. Wyche?”

“Not always, sir. But considering the situation, little else comes to mind. So, gentlemen, what do you think?” Lane considered the question deeply and at length. In a serious tone, he said,

“The Christian equivocation of sin in thought with sin in deed is another twist of the preacher’s screw that has no place in the universe of Newton. Of all the notions of the Creator that I have encountered, the clockwork universe seems profoundly plausible, albeit impersonal and relentlessly inevitable. As I see things, Mrs. Wyche, human reasoning has conveniently elevated the personal struggle between thoughts and actions to the realm of the cosmic. Whereas, the architect of all things stood back and watched the experiment unfold.” Puzzled, Cole asked,

“Impersonal and relentlessly inevitable?” Jane said,

“Mr. Thomas, no doubt, could appreciate your position, Mr. Lane.”

“And you?”

“How could I not? Surely, conversing about my inner demon with two gentlemen that I never met before seems out of step with ‘clockwork’, don’t you think?”

“That is not ironic. You cannot know anybody without meeting them. First encounters can be as random as drawing from a deck of cards.”

“A deck of cards, indeed... you are a philosopher, Mr. Lane. Will you permit me to watch from the platform of our car, if I so desire? I assure you that I will resist the urge to behave recklessly.”

“Can you really say that, Mrs. Wyche?”

“No.”

Upon arriving at Gilridge, Mr. Thomas and company escorted her home without delay. They were somewhat puzzled Jane traveled so lightly, but she explained that being encumbered by servants and baggage would certainly attract attention. Having slipped out unnoticed was the desired result, after all. Thomas, far from being amused, announced his intention to send Malvina away within a week; and if Jane didn't want to be cut off from her income, she had better plan on going with her. Mockingly, he told her that she could leave that next morning since she was used to traveling light. Jane told him that she preferred to wait for Malvina.

A few days before her departure, she sent a note by her housekeeper to Mr. Cassidy. It was just as witty as his and somewhat more alluring. She hinted at a secret that must be shared with him, but demurred from setting any definite time they could meet. He responded with charming encouragement, all in the same gracious formality of the first. This amusing dialogue continued up until the eve of the exile. Then, she was gone. Mr. Thomas thought it unnecessary to provide Cassidy with any information about the ladies' trip or destination.

March 17, 1882. Jane arrived early in the morning to prepare Malvina for the three-day trip to Bartram's Knob. Mr. Thomas, along with the detectives Lane and Cole, accompanied Jane to the hospital to settle the accounts for her sister's long stay and to keep a close eye on the ladies. A special nurse was hired to attend to Malvina permanently, beginning with dressing her for the trip. She was a tall, stocky woman who looked as though she could knock down a bear with little exertion. The staff of the Wyche Mansion was sent ahead to prepare the house on the knob for the arrival of the sisters and their keepers. Mr. Thomas planned to escort the ladies the entire

way. The detectives remained on the knob. Nothing would be left to chance; and as for the superintendent and his staff, they were not provided with any details. Jane protested about being treated like a child by Thomas, telling him the whole plan had the feel of a kidnapping. Cruelly, he asked, “Do you find the thought of being poor appealing?”

As the noon train pulled out of Gilridge, Malvina smiled at the gentlemen surrounding her, took her journal from her bag and asked,

“Gentlemen, would you like to hear a story?” Mr. Thomas replied,

“Yes, we would, Malvina.” Nervously, Jane asked,

“Is it one of your stories, dear?” She answered with a devious smile,

“Oh, yes... I completed it last night. It concerns a plot to prevent blockade runners from delivering cotton to Bermuda. A gentleman working in the State House in Columbia was passing information to the Union Navy. He had an ingenious code that consisted of tiny playing cards that were arranged in a perfect square. The squares were printed on fabric so they appear to be a block printed design – quite impressive!”

CHAPTER FIVE

May 17, 1882. Captain Willard, flanked by two of his men, waited on the platform at the Richmond Station for Little Jack. No sooner had the young man stepped off the express from Fredericksburg was he hustled into a car of another train. There, waiting in tense anticipation, was his mother. After a warm embrace and a pleasant exchange, Captain Willard interjected,

“I am sorry to intrude upon this happy reunion, but we have little time. Your son has made a few discoveries.”

“Yes, Mother, the bonds were stolen from the commercial house of Hamilton LeQuire & Son, now Newton & LeQuire. Your protector, Mr. Caudwell Thomas, represented the company in an effort to recover the bonds from the widow of one of the bandits. Her name was Sarah Huffman. Your childhood friend, the late Judge Richard Coats, turned over the bonds to Thomas at Weldon in the opening days of the war.” Judith sighed and shook her head.

“My-my, son; our Mr. Thomas is full of surprises. As of late, Mr. Kerr assisted me in deciphering a coded message inside his leather case intended for the Union Navy – recalled from the remarkable mind of Malvina Wyche McAdams. Our labors, however, were for naught. Nothing in the text of the message was relevant to our present predicament.”

“I am curious as to where he went to recover from his gunshot wound? After realizing that Fred hoodwinked him, I suppose he was intent upon catching up with the rascal eventually. What do you think of that, Captain Willard?” He replied,

“Obviously, the Union Navy did not get its message on that occasion. Still, we know that our Mr. Thomas is determined to keep your mother safe. Also, regardless of what side he took during the war, he was fulfilling the duties assigned to him. As for the bonds, returning them to their rightful owner is his professional obligation. Despite that, I am curious as to how he became solicitor for the

Central Railroad; what was the nature of his friendship with the late Colonel Wyche; and why, after becoming Fred McAdams' superior, Thomas did not confront him about the bonds?" Judith interjected,

"It seems very clear to me, Captain Willard. Mr. Thomas put Fred to work for him. That is, having him search for the thieves; and perhaps, he pulled Judge Coats into his mission as well. Mr. Thomas could not do anything while the bonds were inaccessible. During all this time, Fred never asked me where they were concealed. Certainly, Fred dug up the coffin. Malvina helped him; I am sure of it. Even so, there was something afoot even before Mr. Thomas showed up. Those people were after me, not Fred!" Jack asked,

"And whose fault was that?"

"It must have been one of the boys."

"Are you sure? Isn't there somebody else? Remember, Mother... a certain little, sweet thing with a vivid imagination."

"Malvina?"

"Yes... I doubt Fred told you much of anything about his scheme. Yet, you were curious, so you had Malvina find out for you. Am I not right?"

"Well, Jackson..., yes."

"Mother... Were you born with this deviousness?" Assuming a look of insincere contriteness, she said,

"It was a skill that took much practice." Captain Willard burst into a fit of laughter. Looking at Willard, she gave a slight smile. Little Jack was not amused.

"Allow me to continue, Mother; there is more to this than you can imagine. Those entertaining stories about you that I've heard so much about from Father... and your friends. That is the only way the killer could have learned about you, Fred McAdams, Senator Littlefield, Judge Coats, and Mr. Thomas. Before I get into that, I want to show you something." Jack removed a thin folded manuscript from his coat pocket and handed it to Judith. "The evening before Malvina was discharged from the hospital, Father

persuaded her to copy her favorite story so he could send it to me – she still thinks I’m a little boy. In her tiny, meticulously neat script, she describes in detail an encounter between ‘Frank Adams’ and an agent from Richmond named ‘Thomas Caldwell’ in the woods. Caldwell was shot by Yankee raiders. We know how that went, so I will skip to the daring ‘Susan’ who hides the treasure. It is written from a young girl’s perspective – Susan’s daughter.” Judith gasped, then read,

“‘She hid the treasure they all covet and death follows them – it is a pretty paper! No, not money. They are called one-thousand pound bonds. They look like engravings with pretty pictures and on them were printed *pay to the bearer on demand the sum of one thousand pounds.*’ Those are the exact words she used when she was describing the bonds to Dr. Lowe!” Willard grumbled,

“Who is Dr. Lowe?” Jack answered,

“That’s my point, sir! Malvina will recite her stories to anybody who will listen. They are a thinly veiled chronicle of Mother’s adventures with a few tall tales thrown in for good measure. Who knows, the tall tales might be how she actually sees things. Notwithstanding, through her cousin Jane, she is related to some of the investors in this region who put up money for the bonds, including the family of Captain Jeremiah Littlefield. Malvina lived with them as a child.” Judith exclaimed,

“Good Lord! She described the child’s coffin in detail. It was fancy, but the only one that I could find. Her Susan ‘placed the treasure in the coffin and buried it in the churchyard.’ Maybe, churchyard sounds better? Still, she found it.” Jack continued.

“I am obligated to share my findings with the sheriff and other authorities in Gilridge. Aside from that, it appears from Father’s letter that nothing of consequence occurred after Mr. Thomas dispersed all the lady targets to parts unknown. Presently, Father is contemplating removing to Europe at the end of the year – with Mother, of course.

June 6, 1882 – Bartram’s Knob. Malvina had drifted from keen-witted decisiveness to the sweet girlish disseminator of inconsequential information – as others would say, “She talked about nothing.” In no way was her delivery incoherent; and at times, it could be slightly interesting, but it was not conversational. She hardly acknowledged the presence of the person listening, nor did it seem like she realized she was speaking aloud. For example, she would explain in exacting detail the duties of every artillery man involved in firing a field piece; and give an equally detailed description of all the equipment involved. Malvina would then move on to a completely unrelated topic such as various plant extracts with anthelmintic properties, that is, treatment for intestinal worms. After a time, her non-stop prattle would become extremely annoying. The nurse hired by Mr. Thomas to attend to her needs was skilled in the art of ignoring her completely, whereas it was driving Jane to despair.

Jane found a form of diversion on the remote estate that was somewhat unsavory. She arranged boxing matches between the various laborers who tended the grounds. Offering a prize of a twenty-dollar gold piece, she watched match after match seated on the piazza drinking tea with ice and fanning herself. From the moment she arrived at Bartram’s Knob, her widow weaves were packed away; replaced with comfortable white cottons which were never completely buttoned. The manager of the estate permitted her entertainment, though he hardly approved. Matches took place on the condition that the overseer acted as a referee so that none of the men received a serious injury. No drinking was allowed by the spectators or participants. These events were always held on a Saturday afternoon after the day’s work was done. The manager, insisting these contests were fought fair and honestly, often made an unannounced appearance. Observing Jane closely on these occasions, he noticed the pace of her fan would increase with the frequency of the blows exchanged between the combatants. For a lady of quality, he surmised, her appetite for violence was quite ravenous.

While riding on this particular day, Jane so happened to encounter one of her boxing gardeners carrying a small tobacco tin aloft in his hand. He was instructed by a man in town to deliver it

personally to Jane Wyche without opening it. Upon receiving it, she removed the lid and found a small envelope tucked between slices of plug tobacco. She handed the gardener a slice and took one for herself. He was somewhat amused at her efforts to bite off the plug in a ladylike fashion, though she succeeded. This was all intended as a distraction; she did not want the man to suspect the tin contained anything more than tobacco. After thanking the man profusely, Jane pointed out that since arriving at the knob, she was unable to indulge her cravings for a chew. He went on his way quite impressed with this bold lady. Needless to say, while Jane occasionally partook of cigars in secrecy, chewing was a completely different experience altogether. In the beginning, the plug tobacco was sweet and satisfying; yet, in time, she began to feel nauseous. Finally, having enough of it, she spat it out; then sat under a tree, holding her forehead with both hands. Figuring it would take some getting used to this form of pleasure, she resolved to try again some other time.

The note in the tin was from Mr. Cassidy. It stated that he was staying in the hotel in the nearby town of Sortilege, and nothing else other than the biblical quote "The truth shall set you free." She assumed this was an invitation to bargain. Having earned an odd sort of respect from the hands who worked the estate, it would be easy to slip away long enough to meet him. If he proved to be willing to align to her purposes, freedom from the tyrant, Caudwell Thomas, would be a certainty. The bond money alone was sufficient to ensure her independence. The great man would have to be content with being responsible for one dependent woman, Malvina. Perchance, she would make him a suitable companion since her mind was an abundant source of diversions from routine. A daunting task remained that might put Jane, and likely, Cassidy at great risk: they had to return to Gilridge and retrieve the remainder of the bonds. She hid them in the Wyche Mansion right under the nose of Mr. Thomas. It was extremely difficult to enter the house unnoticed, but she hid a set of keys outside behind the carriage house in anticipation of returning for such a purpose. Jane was confident she could charm Cassidy into helping her with this; and perhaps, more. Unknown to her, Cassidy was also after the bonds. He had been playing his part

as the unrelenting, but charming, detective to that end and nothing more.

July 7, 1882 – Sortilege. Jane had little trouble making her escape from Bartram's Ridge. Her gardener gladiators had a horse waiting for her at the rear of the estate and two escorted her as far as the road. Sortilege was less than ten miles away. Upon entering the town, she found Mr. Cassidy sitting on a wooden bench under an ash tree puffing on a cigar. He had been waiting for her in the same way he did outside her house in Gilridge. As expected, he tipped his hat. Jane, for a moment, felt a chill even though the temperature outside was stifling. The first remark out of his mouth was a compliment on her white dress. He considered it more becoming than the widow weaves and remarked on how well she browned to golden in the summer sun. She responded by asking if he meant she looked like a farmer's wife; to which he responded,

"You do not look like anybody's wife."

He helped her down from her horse and walked with her to the livery. Jane instructed the gentlemen inside to return the horse to the estate on Bartram's Knob if she did not return within two hours, then paid them in advance for their services.

"You are quite a clever man, Mr. Cassidy" she quipped. "Mr. Thomas took great pains to hide his captive females on this desolate mountain." Cassidy chuckled, and then asked her if she would like a glass of brandy before they commenced their business. She responded by saying that refreshments could wait until all transactions were concluded. They strolled through the meager, squalid town of sorts, conversing as they passed the two-story whitewashed abomination that was the town hall.

Jane remarked on how appropriate the dismal town was for making a confession.

"Are you planning to make a confession to a crime?" he asked with a laugh. She frowned indignantly.

“That, I assume is your purpose; having taken such pains to get here, I have no intentions of leaving you disappointed.” He laughed heartily.

“Are you sure? If you do, I’ll have to take you back to face justice.”

He sat down on a bench and wiped his brow. Jane stamped her foot.

“Now, see here, Mr. Cassidy, it was my understanding from the beginning you were in need of a confession. You sent me a very eloquent letter to that effect in Gilridge. It is ungentlemanly to charm a lady into a confession and then deny her the chance to unburden her soul!”

“I am not here, dear lady, on official business,” he replied, “and I do not care whether you have committed a crime or not; though I doubt very seriously that you could be prosecuted, much less convicted, of anything you imagine being a crime. That said, I would like to present you with a proposition. My distinguished employer, Caudwell Thomas, Esq., is concerned about the disposition of certain bonds.”

“I am assuming, sir, that you are under the impression that I have these bonds?” With a laugh, Cassidy said, “I do. As you know, people associated with this treasure end up killed in particularly interesting ways. Likewise, I know firsthand that one of the deceased gentlemen was not above breaking into ladies’ houses – terrorizing them, no less! Senator Littlefield was searching for the bonds that the late, lamented Fred McAdams so carelessly misplaced; or, possibly, it was his widow.” Jane stopped dead in her tracks, and retorted with indignation,

“Are you saying that you were one of those men that tormented my cousin?” Cassidy turn to face her.

“No, Mr. Thomas had me following Littlefield and his friends. I witnessed the ungentlemanly handling of your cousin – by your

cousin! Because I did nothing, do you consider me a villain also?” Without hesitation, she growled,

“I certainly would, sir! I doubt you have come this far to offer me a confession. I am assuming, by the conversation so far, that you are interested in the bonds? If not, I will unburden you of your guilty conscious and send you back to Gilridge to meet your demise with the knowledge that you have made amends for your wrong doings – I am certain because of your associations, the murderer has you on the list.”

At this point in their stroll, they reached the edge of the town. Mr. Cassidy gave her a pleasant smile, then indicated they should take a seat on a bench. Jane obliged his offer. She said,

“Fred McAdams stole those bonds; I am sure... That is beyond the point. Why are you here?” Without undue verbiage, he stated,

“This is my proposition, dear lady: I will take you back to Gilridge, if you are in possession of those bonds; then escort you safely to New York to redeem them. After that, we will return here to rescue your cousin. When we are safely away from the reach of Thomas, give me a suitable amount to start anew in some remote outpost of the Northwest.” Jane jumped to her feet and faced him with a balled fist. With the utmost frustration, she shouted in his face.

“Sir, I will do no such thing! You will not leave me in any place alone with Malvina! No, you will not!” Standing, Cassidy tried to calm her.

“Sit down, sir,” she snapped. “I am not finished! You do not know how to use the advantages offered to you. You cannot appreciate how much courage it took for me to transform myself into a humble supplicant? You should not make light of me!” In a puzzled voice, he said,

“I am not making light of you, Mrs. Wyche. What would you have me do?” She stood silent, and then turned her back. Finally, she said,

“You need me; so much so, that it was necessary that I had to put myself in this predicament – indeed, I am committed to this – and your meager offer only proves your helplessness. That said, there is a leather portfolio at the Wyche House that contains the bonds and they are worth a fortune. I require your aid in retrieving them. We must do so without Mr. Thomas catching us in the act. If you befriend me and trust me as I trust you, we can share that fortune in some faraway place where we would never be found. I have taken a liking to you, and it is clear to me there is nobody to protect you. It is only a matter of time before you end up like Senator Littlefield, Judge Coats, or my late husband. I cannot let that happen – though, you are somewhat of a disappointment to me.” Cassidy rose, then started slowly pacing about as he mumbled.

“Are you suggesting that we make a new life together? I mean, you don’t want to do that! Life is different out there.” On hearing this, Jane turned to address him harshly.

“No, it makes you sweat to have a lady to refuse your charming deceit. I am contrary, as you can see; you’ll never be rid of me. Don’t think you are going to ask me to give you something of mine and expect not to pay dearly for it. There is no part of hell that you will not visit if you cross me. If I were you – it is the honest truth for nobody knows better – I would leave this place and take the fastest horse to nowhere, leaving me to my own devices. Consider it a challenge, sir! Leave me like this and never look back, if you dare.” Jane sat down on the bench, crossed her arms, and patted her foot impatiently. He grumbled, then said,

“Very well, we go together and stay together!” Jane rose to put her hand on his shoulder as she asked in a soft voice,

“As far away as we can go?”

“Both of you.”

“Good. Circumstance requires that we forgo the usual formalities of friendship and take the risk.”

“Mr. Thomas set a trap for the murderers – a woman, and perhaps, she will bring with her another man. He plans to use himself as bait. That Yankee detective Willard is working with him, I am sure! He sent Mrs. Greene away; you and Malvina are here – not because he wants to save any of you – he wants justice at all cost! I am afraid of that man! I think he arranged for the noose to appear in Malvina’s hatbox. That is the only thing that doesn’t fit.” Jane said,

“No, Mr. Cassidy; that was Malvina’s demon Susan. When we were children, she did it and I was blamed. That is what everybody was thinking this time. Whatever her purpose, it delayed our departure from Gilridge... at my expense. I am certain that Susan hates me... Poor fellow! Actually, you will have to contend with three divergent individuals, not two. Hopefully, wealth will ease your suffering. I redeemed half of the bonds – that is £ 50,000 that my attorney in New York is managing – and that is more than enough for us. Are you so afraid of Thomas that you would settle for half a fortune and me?” He answered,

“Yes, I would.”

“That is very pleasing for me to hear, my friend. A prudent man knows when plenty is enough. Just the same, I would like to try... Not because I am greedy... The risk is too inviting.”

Within the span of a half-hour, Jane and Mr. Cassidy were making their way from Sortilege to the railroad depot another eight miles downward through the pass. During this excursion, Jane told her new friend about her adventures on her mission to redeem the first batch of bonds. He was duly impressed and began to think this arrangement might prove to be a fortunate change of direction for his life. Gilridge was draining away his vitality, giving nothing in return worthy of the sacrifice. Jane offered him a chance to make a fresh break and certainly seemed intent upon doing the same for herself.

July 9, 1882. – Gilridge. Jane and Mr. Cassidy decided to travel only as far as Wayne City together. Cassidy continued on to Gilridge on the morning express; Jane took the afternoon mail train to Northeast Depot, ten miles from town. From there, she hired a

driver to take her into the north of town by way of Gilridge Road and Mill Pond Road. Her driver dropped her off at the cemetery in the late afternoon, then she set out for the old mill on foot. There, she waited until after midnight, the time when Cassidy met her. They followed the stream that fed the mill pond behind the County Hospital to the railroad cut. Following the paths that traverse the length of the inclined plane, they made their way to the rear of the Wyche House, a distance of about ten blocks. On this occasion, Jane found a utilitarian use for her widow weaves. Not only did they make her visit to the cemetery seem convincing, she also blended into the landscape of the night. Aiding their efforts, the moonrise occurred at that time of night and was a waning crescent. There would not be enough light for the two to be readily seen until they made it to the gaslights at Third Avenue. Still, they treaded carefully along the paths on the embankment of the railroad cut.

Thus far, the plan went well. They reached the rear of the Wyche House without detection. Jane retrieved the keys to the house she hid before Mr. Thomas sent her off to Bartram's Knob. To make her task easier, she packed away the bonds in an old carpet bag stored in the cellar. It was very easy to retrieve without waking the caretaker. Mr. Cassidy remained outside standing watch while Jane entered the cellar. Unfortunately, they were not alone. The other woman, dressed as a man, hid herself in the shadow cast by the carriage house at the rear of the lot. Slowly, she made her way around the building, avoiding the moonlight. Anticipating Cassidy's movements, she allowed him to walk ahead. Sensing that somebody was nearby, the detective froze in his tracks and listened. When Louisa took a step, he could hear the overgrown grass near the building rustle. Then, he caught the reflection of moonlight off the barrel of her revolver as she reached the corner. Lunging at her, he grabbed her wrist and tried to wrench loose the weapon. Then, a loud report echoed though the cut! Momentarily, there was a horrific cry of pain.

On hearing the gunshot, Jane raced from the cellar. She could not find Cassidy immediately; that is, until stumbling over his body. Realizing he was dead, her heart dropped. Wanting to cry out, she refrained from doing so. Considering what might happen if she was

found with the bonds, Jane returned to the cellar to place the bonds back in their hiding place. Returning to the body, she considered leaving him; then decided to wake up the neighborhood. Gathering up her thoughts, she let loose her feelings and a blood curdling scream. Within an instant, the caretaker, awakened by the shot, rushed onto the back porch. Shortly thereafter, the curious of the neighborhood were out on Rose Street. The assassin ran through the trees in the adjacent lot and was taken up by a man waiting on horseback near First Avenue and Rose.

The caretaker sent his son to summon the police. All creation arrived in droves about twenty minutes later; soon the house was overflowing with police and curious neighbors. The caretaker placed Jane in a chair in the front sitting room and asked the housekeeper to brew some tea. She had a faraway look in her eyes and was silent from the moment the men found her. Surprisingly, she did not seem too distressed; rather, there was scheming in her eyes. The rear yard of the Wyche House was crowded with the police, Mr. Thomas and his men, along with people from the neighborhood. Thomas, under the circumstances, was in a difficult position. Cassidy was an employee of the railroad, so he could not act as Jane's advocate during the inquiry. By two in the morning, Dr. Lovejoy arrived with his death wagon. Finally, Jane was brought out on the back porch to talk with the Captain of Police. He said,

"Did you kill this man, Mrs. Wyche?"

"No, sir! I cared about him very much!"

"Cassidy? It seems like not so long ago you complained that he frightens you. Since when did you start caring about him?"

"If the truth be known, Mr. Caudwell Thomas, the executor of my husband's estate, threatened me with being cut off and left to my own devices if I did not act as handmaiden to my cousin, Mrs. Malvina McAdams. A few days past, Mr. Cassidy approached me at the remote hermitage where we are imprisoned, offering to spirit the two of us away to the Northwest for a price. I agree to his plan, but first I had to retrieve cash and valuables stored in my safe. Cassidy planned a diversion for the caretaker while I used my keys to break

into the house and take my belongings. I have five thousand dollars in currency and some valuable jewelry. After paying Mr. Cassidy, what remained would be enough to purchase a modest farm out west. That is the whole of it, sir. I had no reason to harm him! Furthermore, I have no weapon. All the Colonel's firearms are in the house."

"You can be assured that we will check them over when we get a warrant. In the meantime, I suggest that you go inside and stay there. In the event that this does not go well, I recommend that you find an attorney to represent you."

Not long after Jane returned inside, the night watchman at the railroad depot appeared before the Captain of Police. While performing his rounds, he saw from his vantage under the train shed on the opposite side of the cut, a man scaling the embankment behind the Wyche House. After the gunshot, he saw him run off into the trees. Later, the watchman at the railroad machine shops reported seeing two men on a horse race away south from the intersection of First Avenue and Rose. The next day, others in the neighborhood came forward with similar reports of seeing two men on a horse.

Mr. Thomas made no effort to prevent the *Messenger* from printing the scandalous tale of Jane and Mr. Cassidy. It made her appear innocent and foolish. The word about the police station was that Cassidy was on the verge of exposing the murderer of Senator Littlefield – nothing more than speculation. Still, it made the man look heroic and cast a favorable light on his "affair" with the loose Mrs. Wyche – besides selling newspapers. The Gilridge Volunteers and their excellent band prepared for another grand funeral. Louisa had inadvertently avenged her fallen comrade – and exasperated her husband. Gaston, waiting at the McAdams House heard the shot and set off in a full gallop down Rose Street. Seeing Louisa fleeing, he pulled her up on the horse as she ran alongside. The following morning, they rode out to the Southside docks to discuss what went wrong.

July 10, 1882. Gaston was at a loss as to what might be their next course of action. Cassidy was out of the way, true; nevertheless, his death closed an avenue for taking possession of the articles that their patrons so coveted. Louisa, by her own admission, did not intend to kill Cassidy; even so, Gaston doubted that her criminal skills matched her evil-mindedness. Further, he thought their chances of catching Mr. Thomas off guard were now next to nil. If they were going to stop him, it would require a less personal approach. He was most vulnerable when he travelled.

The authorities overran the grounds of the Wyche House and the surrounding neighborhood until noon. At around ten o'clock, the Captain of Police returned to question Jane. Mr. Thomas was also questioned, but separately. Jane embarrassed the attorney by forcing him to admit that he had been abusing his position as executor of the Wyche estate. By doling out her allotments in a stingy fashion, she claimed he forced her into the role of nanny for her cousin. Flabbergasted, Mr. Thomas explained that Colonel Wyche had provided generously for both ladies in his will; but was not specific about how the affairs of Malvina, in 'Thomas' words, an "invalid", were to be maintained. The police told him that Jane's explanation of the purpose for creeping around "her" house in the middle of the night would suffice for the time being. The next hour was filled with questions for everybody except Jane, and the taking of statements, even from the curious neighbors that were still lingering. The questioning would go on, then and again.

Jane remained in her room while the police questioned the caretaker and staff. It took a full twenty minutes to go over her story in her head, summoning the necessary tears to sell her tale. While Jane was being questioned again, she stuck to her script: she employed Cassidy to take her and Malvina away where they would never be found. It was true, more or less: leaving Gilridge behind, the new life in the West, and so forth. Then, a dreadful thought! What was she to do now? Poor Cassidy! He was the last move in her game! Even though she had known Mr. Cassidy briefly, Jane became exceedingly fond of him after they met; she started to make plans for

the rest of *his* life. His untimely demise had left her in the hands of the enemy, and Malvina was now alone. The Captain of Police still suspected Jane had a hand in the murder – obviously, by the tone of his questions. He told her to stay put until there was a hearing. Once again, she was a prisoner of Gilridge. Perhaps, there would be another champion to help Jane gain her freedom from Mr. Thomas. Another attempt with Mr. Rouse was in order. Several policemen were posted outside the house to make sure the killer did not come back, and to keep the adventuresome lady from getting into more mischief. When Jane was finally allowed a moment to herself, she collapsed in despair.

CHAPTER SIX

June 4, 1882 – Bartram’s Knob. For Malvina, the mountain retreat had a calming effect; and in short order, her quiet poise and characteristic smile returned. The grand house had a large library that proved to be her singular source of entertainment for hours on end. Outside of pleasant walks around the estate, she worked on her stories in the evening. At least several times a week, she read from her manuscript to Jane, who was in frequent need of relief from the monotony of isolation.

On this particular day, Malvina provided Jane with a plethora of unpleasant details about her experiences at the Oak Female Seminary and the war years that followed, all wrapped up in the guise of passing time. It commenced with a word by word recitation of a sermon delivered by somebody named Reverend Heuchler who conducted Sunday services at the school. Malvina spontaneously launched into the sermon, delivered with all the fire of a preacher at a tent revival. Jane, who was sitting with Malvina, drinking a cup of tea, was so startled by the transformation that she dropped her cup on the floor, shattering it to pieces. Many of the biblical references were wrong; yet, Jane knew that she was repeating exactly what she heard. The preacher’s version proceeded thusly:

“The oldest daughter entrapped the intended of Pharaoh’s daughter with her charms, taking the captain of the guard for herself; and leaving Pharaoh’s daughter to be the wife of the old prince. The Lord, however, visited his wrath upon her for the sin by driving her husband into the hands of the Philistines and striking down her first born male child. She was then sold into bondage, but fled her mistress by escaping into the bulrushes. But Pharaoh sent his foot soldiers after her; but they, being without sin, did not stone her to death!” Malvina suddenly stopped, and turned to Jane with that annoying smile,

“You know that is all wrong, and I think he was making it up as he was going along; yet, he delivered it with so much conviction that

we were duly impressed. He was handsome, too! We girls hung on to every wrong word that came out of his mouth.” Malvina, perspiration rolling from her brow and growing unsteady, nearly stumbled into a chair; nonetheless, the quick reflexes of Jane prevented her from falling. Continuing, Malvina imitated the dramatic hush of the preacher, and then in *sotto voce* said,

“Sire, please command your handmaiden to bring me down from Horab. My garments are spoiled and I am unfit to come to your table. Could you, however, remove the stinger she put in me? I will be quiet then, and sit with my hands in my lap. I will sit up straight; I will not cry out,’ so said the captain of the guard to Pharaoh.” Malvina laughed,

“See, cousin; that is what I learned in school! I’ll show you more.”

She sat down in the wooden chair across the room with her back straight and her hands folded in her lap, then said,

“This is how we sit. It takes practice! ‘Do not move until there is a call to move! Do not fidget! Look only in the direction of those speaking to you! Smile while the other person is talking; if you cannot think of something to say, smile and nod. Behave kindly to everyone, even when they fail you. Be patient with those you detest.’ That was a good lesson.” Jane interjected,

“What was the stinger?”

Malvina sat down in the chair and cleared her throat in a genteel fashion.

“The older girls claimed to know for a fact that a misused girl shot the captain with a pistol after finding him trying to make love to ‘Pharaoh’s daughter’ in the carriage house. She shot him in the buttocks and the ball lodged in the *gluteus maximus*.” Jane erupted in frustration.

“Who is he?”

Malvina paused and gave her an annoying smile.

“It was the preacher, they said; but as one might expect, each preacher had his own tall tales of rising from the depths of sin after God set him straight with the back of his hand. Nobody, but the Episcopalians, wants a preacher who is spotless as a cotton ball and whose sermons sound like poetry recitations. The foremost preachers, they say, were the best sinners! I do hope, dear cousin; the lesson is not lost on you?” Jane stared at her in absolute bewilderment. Malvina said,

“I suppose it would be easier to understand if I said that the captain was a chevalier of the Charleston variety that had his way with a poor girl, and then dropped her for the daughter of a planter. Is that not easier to understand? I think it is, but the Biblical references, although quite incoherent, make for such a dramatic tale. Don’t you think?” Jane frowned, and nodded. Malvina sat down in the soft winged chair beside Jane, and after a moment said,

“I suppose they took a stick to you regularly at that other school – the one for willful girls, I mean.” Jane took a deep breath, then said,

“Malvina, why do you insist upon bringing that up again? You should be surprised how few times they took the stick to me. As long as I did what they asked, even though every nerve in my body told me otherwise, they forgot about me. Of course, there were minor things like fidgeting and daydreaming that everybody did, and for which we were called to answer. The punishments were embarrassing, and sometimes uncomfortable, but nothing anywhere as violent as the stick. You seem to think that I am lying every time you bring it up! For certain, I was willful as a girl, and I remain so as a woman – unlike you, I am consistently myself and nobody else – but there is such a thing as a maturity of the mind.” As if she had not been listening to word Jane was saying, Malvina interrupted,

“They punished me at the Oak School for being distractible and talking with myself. That did not get me the stick, but they had ‘public repentance.’ It was always done before breakfast on Saturday. All the girls and teachers would assemble in the great hall and sit silently watching the offending misses balance heavy cushions on

their heads. Like this one.” Malvina took the cushion from the chair, balanced it on her head, and then slowly went down on one knee and extended her arms out.

“The pose had to be perfect like this,” she said, “and don’t you drop the cushion, else the headmistress would start her count again. She had a very pretty watch! It was gold and pinned to her coat. If you did not complete your time, then there was no breakfast for you. I always did, because there were other places I could go and leave the hard work to the others. If anybody laughed, or much less moved an inch, they were obliged to join you in repentance. One time, a young teacher objected to this method of discipline, and the headmistress threatened to dismiss her on the spot without pay. She was required to make public repentance with the girl who had committed the offense or end up standing on the train platform in the cold with whatever money she had in her pocket – likely, not much, because most of the teachers were pious Yankee farm girls who had been cut loose to make their own way. That was their system, marry or get out. So, the grown lady took her place posing in front of all of us balancing a cushion on her head. I was surprised to see tears rolling down her cheeks.” Jane, extremely upset at this point, tersely asked,

“Why? Don’t you have any feelings?” As she continued to balance the cushion, Malvina calmly responded.

“Yes, dear cousin; I think it is time you send for the sheriff. There is a very nice tree out front with a limb situated at the right height. Did you know the English have precise tables for such events? I have calculated how far, to the inch, that I need to drop for a clean break—” Jane jumped to her feet, and then let out a scream that was an equal mix of frustration and rage.

“Why are you still on the floor trying to balance that damn cushion? Do you want me down there with you doing a ‘public repentance’ with you? Malvina, in a matter of fact voice said,

“No, I like it down here alone just fine. Now, to answer your first question, we girls considered this an athletic game of sorts, though the teachers never suspected. The girl who held her posed the longest or with the most perfect statue-like grace was greatly

admired by her peers. Some, indeed, committed minor infractions against the rules just to challenge the last champion. The young teacher, on the other hand, was actually being publicly humiliated in front of us. You know, I'm doing quite well with this, don't you think? My injury should hurt, but maybe it's hurting her - the sweet innocence that we have to live with... She is so scared of everything. It is problematic when I lose control of her. She was so frightened by the gift in the hatbox. Everybody thought you did it!" Jane snatched the cushion from Malvina's head. Looking sternly at her, she said,

"From the time we left Gilridge, you have been a perennial nuisance! I know you are not Malvina!" Malvina, remaining rigid in her pose, continued her aggravations,

"Shall I tell you about Judith Greene? She is a real teacher. Do you think I should stand up?"

"No" retorted Jane. "First you orate to the point of fainting with your injured lung, and then you are straining your muscles doing a ridiculous exercise on the floor for no reason whatsoever! Continue until you drop, for all I care!"

"Very strange," Malvina replied in a softer voice. "It feels like somebody is supporting my arms."

Jane threw the cushion into the chair from which it came, roughly pulled Malvina to her feet, and then sat her in the chair. She poured a cup of tea, placing it into her hands.

"You are a monster, Susan!" Folding her arms, Jane stared directly into Malvina's face. She returned her glare with a genteel smile.

"Mrs. Greene put herself in dire straits for the army; even, nearly shot by a Yankee. There was one occasion that you might find intriguing, for we were able to enter Baltimore undetected. We slipped into an office at night, and I was instructed to memorize the communications. My teacher was most proficient as a house-breaker: she could make impressions of keys and pick locks of all sorts. This

is a skill that I acquired readily; and unfortunately, that is how I opened the coffin. You will be happy to know, I protected your father. Though, I deeply regret having written about it.”

“Malvina,” screamed Jane, “I want you to stop with this nonsense! It is all in your imagination.”

“I help Fred dig up the coffin!” Jane scoffed,

“You are beginning to believe your own stories. Maybe, something like that happened to Mrs. Greene and she told you. That’s why you think it happened to you!”

“I like it here,” Malvina said in a soft voice, “where we are protected from all harm... by the grace and forbearance of the Almighty... Mr. Thomas. I think I will go to the library and write for a while; maybe, about the young teacher with tears on her cheeks. For her pay, she had to endure humiliation in front of her students. It only took a pittance to bend her knee. Inasmuch as I have tried, her tears will not come to me... it takes all my heart to feel shame. Nobody holds me in such esteem; they pity me for my gift.”

September 22, 1882. Malvina and Jane were reunited, both living together in the Wyche Mansion surrounded by servants and private detectives. While Jane was cleared of any involvement in the murder of Mr. Cassidy, she was subjected to intense scrutiny during the inquest. Consequently, the press brutalized her. Mr. Thomas tightened his control. Ultimately, Jane refused to step foot out of the house. The restoration of the privilege of delighting in the companionship of Malvina and her imaginary friend was a welcome relief. On this day, Malvina told Jane,

“You have the treasure.”

“If I had it, I certainly wouldn’t tell. It would end up in one of your stories. By the way, aside from your doctor friends, who else knows about your stories?”

“The family... your father and Little Susan... Cousin Louisa... at least, those are the few that listened to my recitations. Would you like to hear one now?”

“No, but I am wondering what the family thought of such imaginings.”

“They marveled at my vivid descriptions of everything. Cousin Louisa asked whether I dreamed it all up or based my stories on events that actually happened.”

“What did you tell her?”

“My stories are based on the real adventures of a brave lady that took care of me during the war. She was friends with Father.”

“Did you tell her that it was Mrs. Greene?”

“No... Did you know that Louisa is living in Gilridge? I guess not, since you refuse to go outside. The soldiers that Mr. Thomas has protecting us are not rude in the least. You should take a carriage ride about town on Sunday. Well, Louisa married a fellow named Gaston Calder. He runs the lumber mill. Mr. Rouse said that the railroad plans to run a spur to the mill at the beginning of the year.”

“When did you talk to Mr. Rouse?”

“Mr. Thomas took me for a walk about the depot. I saw a new locomotive, too! The soldiers came with us as they usually do. Mrs. Greene was captured by that varmint Captain Willard! She must be in a Yankee prison.”

“The war is over, Malvina!”

“Are you sure?”

“Except in your head, I am sure it was over some time ago. Didn’t your Susan tell you?”

“Susan is thinking about Dr. Lowe. She wants to marry him.”

“I wish she would!

Using all the information collected by Captain Willard, including a firsthand account provided by Judith Greene, Thomas published a long article in the *Messenger* detailing the theft of the bonds, the

meeting with Judge Coats at Weldon, his encounter with Fred McAdams after being shot during the Union raid, the burial of the bonds by Mrs. Greene, the multiple attempts on her life, and the possible existence of a letter penned by Sarah Huffman that might lead to those who carried out the theft. Finally, he offered a reward of one thousand dollars for any information leading to the recovery of the bonds. Now, the story was out in the open. Mr. Thomas needed to be disposed of at the earliest moment. Once again, the *Kinsfolk* required the services of Louisa and Gaston. Upon receiving their orders, Gaston said,

“Thomas set a trap for us, and you know it. There is no way that I can think of getting to him without being killed or caught. The only approach that comes to mind is to do to him what the ‘gray hoods’ did with McAdams: know when he is travelling out of town, and then take a bridge out from under his train. The problem is that he is secretive about his movements.” Louisa interjected,

“Come now, Gaston, there is one time he will appear without his armor. The annual meeting of the stockholders of the railroad is held on the last Tuesday of November. His presence is required. The proceedings are held in the ballroom of the town hall; shareholders and interested parties come from all corners. We have three opportunities to get at him, when he arrives, during the meeting, and when he leaves. Regardless, I think we should purchase shares, and then attend. It will make being seen there explicable. Have you any ideas about our method?”

“Off hand, I cannot think of any means that would not place us at risk of being captured or killed. We must study the location first. I am sure there must be a subtle way of going about this.”

Before the annual meeting took place, a chance sequence of events completely upturned the plans and altered the course of their lives. For Caudwell Thomas, victory came by accident and without satisfaction.

November 21, 1882. It was unseasonably warm at midday; but by late afternoon, a steady wind brought the chill. The gusts were particularly heavy along the wharf, and it seemed more like a gale in

the narrow alleyways of the lower blocks of town. The ancient side wheeler *Rice King* was tied up at the dock alongside the turpentine distillery. Her cargo was coal from a bituminous deposit about sixty miles above the falls. Mined since antebellum times, coal was sent down river in shallow-bottomed bateaux through the network of sluices and canals that paralleled the river. At the landing below the falls, the coal was loaded on to the steamboat for the last leg of the journey. The heaps were transported in thickly woven hemp cord hampers with wooden bottoms, easily lifted off the deck of the steamboat by a crane. It was an inefficient method of transport that would eventually be replaced by a railway from the coal fields to the Western Railroad. Upon completion, rail car loads of coal took a more circuitous route to the port by way of a northeast arc. While a further distance, it consumed half the time. Other factors contributed to the rapid employment of rail transport of this commodity in the ensuing year.

The cargo of *Rice King* included lumber, flour, and sundry merchandise. Usually, there were a few passengers, though swift and more accommodating modern vessels plying the inland waters nearly caused the owners to discontinue passenger service. However, the fact that they did not adopt that measure caused a number of usually harmless errors to align in a perfect catastrophe. The mechanism of disaster was set in motion shortly after the *Rice King* docked at 4:15 that afternoon. An unknown passenger gave the deckhands two bottles of strong spirits which they hastened to drink after the first mate and captain went ashore. The second mate napped in his quarters before taking his watch; and the third mate, a notoriously inept dullard, spent his time on watch playing cards with the cook. It is impossible to determine when or how the fire started, but apparently it was well underway by the time anyone on-board noticed. By 9:05, the general alarm was given. Soon, the dockside was a frenzy of activity. The deck of the *Rice King* blazed, fanned by a stiff wind and fed on its abundant supply of combustibles. Conditions were ideal for a full conflagration. Embers from the doomed vessel, driven by the gusts, sprayed the length of the wharf; soon an old schooner was ablaze. Bales of cotton took light, and the

hundreds of barrels of turpentine stored between the cotton compress and the distillery followed. From that point forward, the inferno could not be contained. Crews from the ships in port frantically assembled and cut loose their vessels in an effort to move clear of the danger. A few still under steam managed to make it to the docks on the other side of the river. The remaining dropped anchor in the middle of the ship channel; a few glancing encounters occurred on the way to this position. Still, three old wooden sailing ships went up in the blaze.

The fire at the docks was visible from County Hospital at around 9:30, but it didn't inspire awe until the entire western horizon was a glow about an hour later. In the business district, there was considerable concern that the wind might drive the fire over the bluff to First Avenue; it did so in less than an hour, pushing northward to the depot. An unrelenting din of whistles reverberated through the crisp autumn air as the railroad scrambled to move locomotives and rolling stock from their docks and lower yards to the safety of the upper yards a few blocks from the hospital. The old brick warehouse near the company docks was the first structure at the depot to be engulfed by flames.

Dr. Greene arrived at the hospital on horseback shortly before eleven o'clock. While his route there from the southernmost end of town did not take him near the burning district, he reported having seen crowds of men and boys rushing there with every sort of implement ready to battle the blaze. The hospital staff, only half of its daytime size, sprang into action in anticipation of a flood of serious injuries. In short order, most of the staff and some volunteers, including the coroner, Dr. Lovejoy, made their way to the hospital from different parts of town. A messenger sent by the railroad to the hospital reported that the fire had destroyed the old passenger dining hall and the oil house. The wind was driving the flames up the inclined plane from the river, and it was likely that the ice-house would be next. The plant used the ammonia process and there was considerable fear of an explosion.

On the north end of First Avenue, the grand antebellum houses built after the last great fire in 1843 were being reduced to ashes like their colonial predecessors. The top of the bell tower of the old Episcopalian church on the east side of the street caught fire before the eyes of the rector and his wife. Quickly, they raced to load the altar service and church archives on a two-wheeled dray. On the final visit inside, they dared to enter the sanctuary once more. The light streaming in through the stained glass windows from the fires was both beautiful and frightening. The rector's wife gathered up an armload of sheet music from the organ. She paused briefly to play a few chords with her left hand on the silent instrument – a marvelous creation by Jardine & Son with elaborately decorated façade pipes. Afterwards, she dashed out to safety. Her husband followed, gilded crucifix in hand. Not long after their daring rescue of the accoutrements of worship, the cupola of the bell tower gave way and toppled over, crashing through the roof of the sanctuary. The couple pushed their horseless dray for two blocks uphill until a few passersby helped them as far as the gardens surrounding the courthouse. There, in the safety of the ancient oaks, both broke down into tears. They were fortunate to make it out of the burning district with their lives before the real horror commenced.

The first casualty of the fire to make it to the hospital was the manager of the turpentine distillery. He attempted, without success, to retrieve the account books from his office when the adjacent works exploded, shattering the windows; the force drove shards of glass into his upper body. Several of his workers carried him on foot the entire distance to the hospital. Bleeding heavily, the man hovered on the verge of unconsciousness. Dr. Greene labored earnestly to stop the bleeding, but his life ebbed away, despite all efforts, within the span of a quarter hour. Only one of the men who brought him stayed to receive the bad news; the others dashed back to help with the fire. Not one was ever seen again after that night. Presumably, they were among the unfortunates that were lost in an ill-conceived plan to create a firebreak on Second Avenue. By blowing up a line of wooden tenements and outbuildings surrounding the old livery

with black powder, it was possible the flames' uphill advance could be held in check. The wind shifted unexpectedly on the firemen and volunteers, trapping them in the center of the block. The first charge of powder they set off sent smoldering boards flying upward, landing in the patch of dry broom straw and brambles that grew up in the open space at the center of the block. A brave fellow who drove the powder wagon through the conflagration to safety was the only man to make it out alive. The ice house, located at the northern side of the same block on a slope fronting the railroad, caught fire. The roof of the passenger train shed on the opposite side of the inclined plane the ice-house caught fire shortly thereafter, and the entire depot with its offices, machine shops, and roundhouse were in danger. The wind, however, shifted easterly sending the sparks and cinders towards the houses on the railroad cut extending as far as Third Avenue.

The elegant Wyche mansion – located on Rose Street near the depot – escaped destruction in the short term. Jane and Malvina fled the house for the temporary safety of the depot at about the time the bell tower of the First Avenue Episcopal Church collapsed. Jane emptied the contents of a strongbox containing cash, stock certificates, and sundry valuables into a carpet bag, then made her way with Malvina in tow across the iron bridge to the concourse. From there, they scaled the hill behind the roundhouse to a line of overgrown mounds north of the depot. It once was the site of an artillery battery during the war. From this vantage point, there was a clear view of the lower yards and company wharf of the railroad below, now all in flames. Momentarily safe, Jane realize that she forgot to retrieve the bonds from their hiding place in the basement.

The path that ran alongside the northern edge of the railroad from the old earthworks to the Fourth Avenue Bridge was a dusty lane sporadically lined with tenements and flophouses on one side; on the other, there was a six-foot high wooden fence that obstructed access to the shops and passenger yard. In order for Jane and Malvina to make it to the McAdams House on Rose Street, they needed to walk four blocks east, cross the bridge, and continue up

Rose another block. With such a large quantity of cash and other valuables she was carrying, Jane was apprehensive about passing through the neighborhood. She took one of Colonel Wyche's pistols as she rushed out of the house, but failed to check whether it was loaded. Now, hiding in the mounds, she discovered it was not. All the same, nobody but she knew that. When the time seemed right, she planned to make a dash for the bridge. Anybody that attempted to accost her would be deterred by a pistol pointed directly in their face. Malvina was something of a liability; she was apt to draw trouble by her erratic nature. Momentarily, Jane thought of sending her on to the bridge in case there were hoodlums afoot along the way. Then she weighed the value of the contents of the bag against the prospects of losing the only person in her life that gave her a sense of autonomy: the person who was absolutely dependent upon her every minute of the day. She decided that they would both make a run for the bridge together.

Quietly, Jane and Malvina climbed over the earthwork mounds. From a distance, they saw the Wyche Mansion in flames. Unable to endure the sight for long, she pulled her confused companion along by the sleeve of her coat. After making their way through a thicket, the unlit dirt road appeared before them. The sky was glowing bright amber, but the fence cast a shadow across their path. They crept along in its shadow. This strategy worked well until the ice-house exploded. The force of the blast rattled the fence and the window of every tenement on the lane. Residents who watched the fire from their porches and the sills of upper story windows were startled into a frenzy of activity when fiery debris came raining down in their yards. Malvina tried to pull away from Jane, but fell upon the ground under the blow of the carpet bag brought down on her shoulder. In the act of helping Malvina to her feet, Jane dropped the pistol. A deep voice in the shadows exclaimed, "Let's run!" The man took hold of Malvina's other arm and said more insistently, "We need to run!"

It was not long before the noxious vapor reached the north side of the cut. It sent the residents running in all directions. When the man took Jane and Malvina as far as the bridge, they stopped for a

moment to take in fresh air. The giant of a man, his face still cloaked in the shadows, took hold of Jane's wrist and pressed the pistol into her hand, "You dropped your gun." After that, he ran off down the road in the direction of the upper yards. Jane's heart nearly stopped when the man took hold of her. Before she had time to regain her composure, he was gone. Both women suffered the ill effects of their exposure to the caustic vapors including a sore throat, coughing, and runny eyes and nose.

The bridge at Fourth Avenue was the only way over the railroad tracks between the iron bridge at the depot and the leveling out of the cut in the upper yards. Resting on four brick piers, the rickety wooden spans were poorly aligned, and too narrow to allow pedestrians and wagons to pass safely at the same time. Built during the 1850s, it long was deemed obsolete. Even so, the town and the railroad were never able to come to an agreement on who was to pay for its replacement. Two gas lamps lit its entire length, and that was hardly enough. Jane and Malvina had little problem making it halfway since the light cast by the burning passenger shed illuminated the way forward. A path of sparks and embers streamed below the bridge; carried by the wind being channeled through the cut. Malvina, bedazzled by the sight, refused to be pried from the unsteady railing that separated her from a certain fatal drop to the tracks below. Once again, Jane was tempted to leave her, but natural affection prevailed. She yanked Malvina away from her fixation by a strong tug on her hair. Within a few minutes, they were on the steps of the old house.

Dr. Wilson, accompanied by Dr. Lewis from the Government Hospital, arrived at 11:45 after taking the Gilridge Road from the center of town to the footpath running beside the mill creek, then cut through the cemetery to the rear of the hospital. Like Dr. Greene, they made the trip on horseback for want of time to hitch up a rig and the desire to travel at a full gallop if necessary. They did not find mass casualties when they arrived, only an anxious staff waiting for the worst carnage that had been seen by many since the war. Two police officers rode up from the town about midnight wanting to speak with the director. Dr. Lowe took them into the front hall and

sent an orderly to the kitchen to bring them coffee. The gist of their report was this: the decision agreed upon by the aldermen for the safety of the citizens was to pull back the fire brigades and volunteers to Third Avenue on the east and the docks on the Southside. The fire contained within these boundaries was beyond the means of extinguishing. The whole ward was a complete loss, and anybody foolish enough to venture into the inferno did so at their own peril. There was at least a dozen known dead, and likely more to be found when the fire had run its course. Surely, anybody unfortunate enough to have remained was roasted to ashes. Dumbstruck at this dire pronouncement, Dr. Lowe exhaled before asking about the injured. The policemen did not know of any great numbers of injuries in town, but anticipated they would arrive as quickly as they presented themselves to the authorities. Dispersed on the perimeter of the burning district, the fire chief organized men with wagons to carry the injured. The mayor telegraphed the governor, but his response was not known to the policemen by the time they were dispatched to the hospital. With that, the policemen excused themselves, and then proceeded to the depot in the upper yards to speak to the superintendent of the railroad.

Dr. Lowe was not convinced that the police gave him the full truth of the situation; or at least, doubted the enormity of conditions was knowable at that time. The Great Fire of 1843 started in the same general location on the docks, on a day that started warm, but turned cold and windy, and it consumed the same district – including the first depot. It nearly ruined the railroad company and the town. He imagined that the amount of regional wealth lost in the present conflagration would certainly turn back the clock for the town to the years following the end of the war. What would happen to all the families displaced by the fire? Dr. Lowe quickly dismissed the thought, returning to more immediate concerns.

The old depot in the upper yards was ill-equipped for the enormous influx of traffic along the full extent of the line. The chaos unfolded in clear view. James Rouse experienced frequent crises

during his tenure as assistant superintendent of the railroad, but none of it prepared him for anything of this magnitude. Now, he was in charge of everything! It was more than obvious that through traffic needed to be diverted away from the city. That was a matter of daily routine. The north arc, a section of tract extending from the bridge over the river to the junction at the upper yards, was the way through traffic skirted the town since 1869. What troubled him was thinking of all the ships in port that had been forced to cut loose from the wharves to fend for themselves in the river or go up in flames. He had seen the debacle unfold before his eyes as he watched from the stationmaster's tower. Of the seventy or so ships in port tied up along a two-mile stretch, half must have escaped into the middle of the river. The railroad bridge was nearby, and low enough to be damaged if one of the ships crashed into it. For the time being, trains could not be sent over that bridge. He telegraphed Wayne City Depot to stop all southbound trains until they could be rerouted. Likewise, he sent a telegram to stop all present northbound traffic in the yards on the opposite side of the river. The telegrapher worked feverishly to relay the state of things to all the stations and the other railroad companies that would have to reroute traffic.

When the two policemen arrived with their message, Rouse had no time to speak with them. Left to wait on the platform of the old depot, they became transfixed by the frightening scene of the blaze at work within the cut from its end. It was like a gigantic flue that channeled heated air from a furnace. The sparks that so entranced Malvina on the Fourth Avenue Bridge were propelled with the stream of air up the incline the length of several blocks before burning out in flight. The entire yard was filled with the acrid smell of burnt tar mixed with a host of peculiar fumes that stung the eyes and made them water. Adding to the stench was the voluminous smoke from locomotives in the crowded upper yards – brought on their own power or hauled. One by one, their tenders were filled so they could be sent up the line to Northeast Station at the ten-mile mark. The policemen's horses became frightened, so they placed them in the care of a keeper of the stables in the upper yard.

Seeing the policemen coughing when the frequent clouds of stench swept across the platform, a young freight conductor advised

them to follow him up to the office in the marshaling yards. Located around the bend in the tracks buffered by a stand of trees, it was about a quarter-mile walk along a dirt path skirting the array of tracks from the old depot. It was usually a noisy place, even at night; on the evening of the fire, the noise converged into a perpetual din. Like the lower yards, it had machine shops, offices, and a massive coaling station. The facility was constructed to service freight and through traffic from the southern lines terminating there, and jointly owned by the several companies. The rolling stock from the lower yards and passenger depot were hastily shunted by yard engines into whatever available track space remained – all of them to be sorted out when regular service resumed.

The policemen were given a place to wait in the yardmaster's office. It was a pointless waste of time since there was nobody of significant authority to receive their message. They were given a few blank pages to write it out. After they had finished, they were told to make their way back to the old depot and deliver it to the superintendent. Nearly half an hour elapsed while waiting to see him the first time! Two hours passed since they left the Captain of Police with their message. Under these conditions, it was hardly news. When they reached the old depot, the conditions had, indeed, changed. It was they who had news to deliver back to their headquarters. The fire jumped the cut, and was now well established in the First Ward laborers' district on the north side! The car department and paint shop situated east of the roundhouse were ablaze, and the center span of the Fourth Avenue Bridge started to take. The policemen ran toward the stables to get their horses, only to find it empty. All the horses were taken to a farm on the other side of the mill creek. The policemen had the choice of treading the footpath in the dark around the cemetery, or the much longer, but well-lit, road that passed by the hospital. The return trip back to the perimeter that the fire chief said his team would take their stand amounted to a dash of three and a half block south on Tenth Avenue and seven blocks west on Rose Street. Rather than retrieve their horses, they decided to run.

At the intersection of Tenth and Rose, they found a crowd of residents fleeing towards the hospital. In every possible conveyance and on foot, citizens scrambled forward with whatever possessions they could carry. Continuing down the street, they discovered that the defenders had failed to contain the fire at Third Avenue. Now, several nearby houses were blazing out of control, and the spire of the Methodist Church was alight. Worse yet, when they reached the intersection of Fourth and Rose, they saw the fire advancing up the saplings and underbrush that lined the slope of the railroad cut. The trusses that supported the center span of the bridge were burning vigorously.

Now, the uneasy calm at the hospital ended abruptly. Not only were the injured from all over the town arriving, but the frightened refugees from Rose Street and the surrounding neighborhood converged on the hospital. The reassuring message of the policemen proved incredibly inaccurate and premature. Unfortunately, the fire escaped the northeastern boundary and was less than six blocks away! Dr. Lowe addressed the able body of the crowd congregated on the hospital lawn, imploring them to seek shelter elsewhere. The safest route, he supposed was following Tenth Avenue south to the Gilridge Road that led back to the Southside. Closer at hand, the cemetery and the farms beyond the mill creek would have to do for a temporary encampment. Those inclined to lend a helping hand at the hospital could stay. The smoky pall that enveloped the grounds discouraged many from choosing the latter. From the highest window facing Rose Street, an orderly kept watch on the advance of the fire. The horses were hitched to the ambulance shortly after the blaze was first noticed. Now, the staff contemplated using it to move the most seriously ill patients to whatever suitable location could be found, even if it was a private residence. Thereafter, a general evacuation would utilize all conveyances at hand. The warning was given when the spire of the Methodist Church caught fire.

Jane observed the advancing conflagration in horror from the windows of the house on Rose Street. It was unavoidable since the only other source of light was a dim oil lamp she lit upon entering

the house. The gas line to the house was severed somewhere on the block. This condition magnified her anxious thoughts, "Even here, we're not safe! Where do we go now?" There was a buggy in the carriage house, but she had sold the horse thinking they would never need it. Their reclusive existence in the Wyche Mansion was devised to keep Malvina from the world, and the world from Malvina. The whole travail that they were hitherto subjected to might have been avoided had she retained her husband's servants. Her fear of prying eyes and loose tongues deprived the two of a sure escape. While secure in wealth, they were friendless women.

There was nothing worthy of risk in the McAdams House, yet Malvina stubbornly stumbled about the dark house looking for something that she could not describe even if it was there. Her mind was fixated on searching and nothing more. Jane abandoned any thought of devising a plan. She pulled a blanket from a bed and rolled it up. Placing it under her arm and taking the carpetbag in hand, she ran upstairs to get her cousin. Catching a glimpse of the spire of the Methodist Church on fire through a side window, she reckoned that it would be a while before the fire reached Fifth Avenue. When she entered the bedroom where Malvina frantically searched blindly through the closet, she saw a scene through the rear windows that made her gasp in horror. The fire in the railroad cut advanced into the back yard. The rear wall of the carriage house and former servant quarters were in flames! In an act of desperation, she took the method of last resort to bring her manic sister into pliability. She carefully made her way downstairs to the porch and cried out for help.

The men Mr. Rouse sent to examine the bridge at the river found it undamaged, but the sight of the inferno on the wharf from this vantage point was startling. Fed by barrels of naval stores, there seemed no human way to stop it. The flames were so high and bright that they illuminated the opposite bank of the river and the host of ships in the waterway. The company wharves of the railroad were gone! The warehouses were gone! Every building up to First Avenue

was reduced to ashes! It was a lamentable folly that so much flammable material had been stored closely: it hardly required a burning ship to set it all alight; a carelessly discarded match would have brought about the same result. Nevertheless, the bridge needed to remain closed to traffic until the river was clear.

Rouse started moving his locomotives up the line as soon as their steam was up. Having experienced the inexplicable horrors that accompanied acts of sabotage during the war, he was unwilling to send more than three of the locomotives as far as Wayne City. Most were sent to nearby stations north of town. The three locomotives dispatched to Wayne City carried passenger cars with the essential personnel to run the railroad from the new location. He left with the last train.

During the trip, Rouse pondered the destruction left behind, and the possible motives that anyone would have for creating it – if that be the case. He could not conceive of any reason why a person or a group of them, particularly skilled in the requisite stealth and genius to maintain a prolonged assault upon a community and its institutions, could do so without ends or purpose. Even a madman driven by a perceived affront would at some point reveal the slight in some form or another. For all the time and treasure spent on apprehending the fiend or fiends who murdered the great men of Gilridge, there was never enough evidence to issue an indictment against anyone. What if, in spite of the unusual nature and frequency of the murders, no one purpose connected them?

Outside the McAdams House, a fleeing couple answered Jane's cries for help. Seeing the commotion a block away, the two policeman who were attempting to return to headquarters ran back to offer their assistance. Jane explained to the men that her cousin was terribly frightened and would not leave the house. One of the policemen recognized Jane, for he had participated in the search for Malvina in the graveyard months earlier. He confided to his companion as they entered the house that the lady inside was a mad woman. On reaching the room where Malvina was hiding, her shadowy figure passed between them before they could react. She

bolted down the stairs and out the front door in an instant. Jane attempted to grab her coat before she made it off the porch, but the bag and blanket encumbered her. The couple standing on the walk attempted to stop Malvina, but they only momentarily slowed her down. She dodged their every attempt to corner her. Eluding all, she made it to the street, running back towards Fourth Avenue in the direction of the fire. Jane dropped the bag and blanket in the middle of the street and ran behind her as fast as she could. The policemen caught up with Malvina at the intersection. By this time, the Methodist Church was completely in flames; the firemen which hopelessly attempted to hold the blaze at Third Avenue moved their equipment to Fourth. Intermingling with their number, Malvina managed to elude her pursuers and make for the Fourth Avenue Bridge.

The center span of the bridge collapsed into the ravine below, a full twenty-four feet. Blocked by a policeman on her left and right with Jane a few feet back in the center of the road, Malvina was trapped. As they moved forward, she slowly retreated onto the bridge. Jane implored her to come back, but she stepped back further onto the bridge. She was now on the second span, of which, the end closest to the pier was burning intensely. The heat rising from below was unbearable, and sparks driven by the gusts showered her. Jane collapsed in tears, begging her to come back to safety. The sight of Jane in distress seemed to attract Malvina's attention. She advanced forward a few steps. After a moment, she started to walk toward the end of the bridge. The span shattered and the west-facing end dropped about a foot from the pier. One of the policemen ran out on the first span to rescue her. Coaxing her to come to him, he managed to get her to walk a few steps more. The tilting of the span caused Malvina to fall forward. On hands and knees, she made it a few more agonizing paces. Then for some reason he could never explain, the policeman rushed onto the damaged second span and dragged her by the arm to the middle of the first span. The other policeman joined him, and rushed her off the bridge in an instant. The failing bridge held for a few moments longer, then twisted to one side and separated. The truss buckled, and the pier supporting

the second span suddenly collapsed under the stress. It might not have been the closest brush with death, but it was considerable. On this occasion, the police had no reservation about restraining Malvina. They escorted her double time towards the hospital firmly gripping each arm. On the way, Jane retrieved the precious carpetbag that she left in the middle of the road, but the blanket was nowhere to be found.

Dr. Lowe commenced the evacuation of the serious patients from the hospital after the Methodist Church collapsed. About this time, he received some much-needed assistance from the Bailey Hotel. They had sent their omnibus to help take patients to the government hospital on the Southside. Also, a number of townsfolk arrived with an assortment of conveyances for the evacuation. The smoke enveloping the hospital started to clear, but the lookout posted in the window above shouted out that the fire was still moving north. The people living in this part of town were cut off by the fire in the railroad cut. To get to them, one would have to follow the mill creek above the cemetery, and then walk along the railroad track to the river. Dr. Greene wanted to talk with the railroad crew to see if they could send an engine out to pick up anybody trying to escape the fire. Dr. Lowe told him that the railroad was likely doing that since most of the workers in their shops lived in that part of town. Even so, he reminded his old friend that they had problems enough to deal with at the hospital.

When the police arrived with the troublesome Malvina and Jane, they were met with consternation. Tersely, Dr. Lowe asked if any of them was seriously hurt. On learning that they didn't think so, he told them to evacuate with the rest. Turning his back, he entered the hospital without saying a word. They would have to take her to the jail. Jane voiced her objections to the idea. Malvina was not in her right mind and needed special care. They agreed, but could not think of a better idea. They began the long walk down Tenth Avenue. About a block into their southward march, Malvina began babbling in a completely everyday conversational tone about various things that did not make sense. The blind panic that had gripped her disappeared suddenly. The policemen, still holding her arms, could feel the tension fall away. Gradually, the babbling transitioned into

small talk directed to the individual officers. The only part of her illusion of conversation they both found particularly disconcerting were references to the “beautiful sunset” and “aroma of freshly baked cornbread.”

The gas lights of the hospital flickered out shortly after one o'clock. The main gas line serving the fifty blocks on the north side was shut down by the lighting company sometime earlier on account of damage to the lines. The process of shutting down the gas commenced when the managers of the company learned the fire had become uncontrollable, advancing eastward up to Commerce Street – the spine of the town. A crew of men turned off the supply of gas flowing through the pipes running north for each of the avenues. The fire had reached as far as Fifth Avenue, but the supervisor of the crew decided to turn off the gas at Sixth through Tenth. The pipe at Seventh Avenue branched off to the sparsely developed easterly running streets, some of which lacked gas lighting entirely. The refugees fleeing by way of Tenth Avenue, the boundary street of the town, were thrown into darkness. Though the path to light was a mere five blocks away, all but the most desperate continued. Some made camp along the roadside, while others accepted the hospitality of residents of the neighborhood. Those that had fled to the cemetery took shelter in the chapel.

The true extent of the fire included three blocks along the docks, the wharves of the railroad, and a swath of buildings in an arc that tapered to a few houses on Fifth Avenue near the railroad. The destruction in the railroad cut was extensive, but was limited to an area no further than the passenger shed. On the north side of the cut, fire destroyed a few houses and an extensive stand of trees, but lost its momentum when it encountered the farmlands. The winds that drove it slacked off at about half past one, and a chill started to set in. The lookout posted in the hospital's highest window beheld the extent of the ruin downhill as the veil of smoke lifted: the burning shell of the manufacturing district at the bottom of the hill was clearly visible against the darkness. The remaining staff at the

hospital cared for the patients who could not be moved. The injured arrived sporadically throughout the night. Most had gashes and broken bones that they had suffered from trying to fight or flee the fire. The instances of burns were of a minor sort. Dr. Lowe ended his porch-front triage after three.

On reaching the Gilridge Road, nearly a half-hour after being turned away from the hospital, the policemen contemplated a course of action that might be in the best interest of the ladies they had taken under their protection. Jane was insistent that she did not want Malvina taken to the jail. Nothing good could be done for her there. The policemen were inclined to agree. Since she did not commit a crime, the Captain of Police would remand her to Jane's care immediately. So, they decided to escort the ladies past the mill creek to the end of the town limits where Jane and Malvina might find shelter in a farm house. Perhaps, on the way, they might be reunited with their horses since the farm to which they were taken was in the neighborhood. One of the policemen kindly relieved Jane of the burden of carrying her bag of treasured paper.

During the walk, Malvina transitioned from uninterrupted chatter to lucid questions; that is, what one might expect from a person truly interested in their company. She asked the policemen about their families and how did they come to know Jane. She asked why they were walking in the dark, and where they were going. This was rather disconcerting to the men. It was as though nothing had transpired prior to that time. Jane explained the Malvina had several persons inside her that were working at cross purposes. When one of them takes over, she might as well be asleep. One of the men asked Jane what she planned to do about the problem. Her response was to take her sister to the North to search for a cure, if that was possible. If not, Europe offered more suitable places for her lifelong care than were available in the States. The fire, for better or worse, took away her desire to stay. She planned to hire somebody, preferably with a carriage, to take them to Norfolk immediately after first light. When they reached the bridge over the mill creek, Malvina asked if she was going to be tried as a spy. She was under the

impression that she had been captured by Yankee soldiers, and the town had fallen during a bombardment as had happened during her childhood. Jane told the policemen were soldiers that had rescued her when shell started falling around the house. Malvina said she seemed to remember that part, but was not sure what happened next. It was painful for the policemen to witness her mind trying to make sense of what happened to her in her absence. Malvina praised the two for having risked their lives – which was true – to save her. Then she asked if one of them would like to marry her. They both respectfully told her that they were married – which was not true.

The town boundaries ended at a farm about a quarter-mile beyond the mill creek. Jane thanked the “soldiers” for their gallantry. Malvina wondered how they were going to make it to safety in the dark. They told her that they would be safe at a nearby farm until morning. The policemen escorted the ladies to the farm house. The farmer was given a brief explanation of the situation in private, and then the policemen left. Jane and Malvina spent the evening in the farmhouse waiting for one of the farmer’s hired hands to return with a carriage and driver from Northeast Township. Malvina spent the entire time telling their host about “our miraculous escape from certain death”. It was truly an exciting story, though entirely the product of her imagination. Jane lamented the fact that her cousin’s mind was never calmed long enough for her to develop her talents. Maybe, the cure might come in Europe...

“My God, Louisa; would you look at that!”

“Quite impressive, indeed.” Gaston, watching from the balcony of their Southside townhouse, was transfixed in awe. The flames across town towered above the horizon.

“With luck, the business resulting from this mishap will keep our mill humming at full capacity for two years, if not more! Maybe, we will have to expand?” Louisa, sipping her Madera said,

“Wouldn’t it be nice if the Wyche Mansion was nothing more than a fine dust – papers, bonds, and meddlesome Jane... poor, poor Malvina.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Even if the ladies survived, recall what our lovely Jane said at Mr. Cassidy’s inquest. The purpose of enlisting the aid of that unfortunate fool was to wriggle free of Caudwell Thomas. Given her inclinations, she could use this catastrophic occurrence to her advantage. With the whole of the town in confusion and panic, the tyrant would not know whether his womenfolk were amongst the refugees or incinerated to dust. Jane has cause to prolong his uncertainty indefinitely; thus, we have nothing to fear from these lost little lambs regardless of whether they have the documents and bonds.”

“True, my lovely, if the ladies planned to bargain for their freedom with these items, they would have done so by this time. So, do we still need to kill Thomas?”

“It serves no purpose, unless he has Sarah’s letter. That my father and several others are not in prison attests to the fact that it has eluded him. The story he printed in the *Messenger* to lure us into a trap is little better than fiction. Nevertheless, this ill-conceive jumble gives me pause. It appears high time that we reorganize the secret fellowship of our kinsfolk, and direct its purpose towards more lucrative outcomes. After all, Reconstruction is over.” Gaston lit his cigar, then flicked the match over the balcony. Turning to Louisa, he said,

“As always, I prefer to make money. Business is good, and our prospects look better than ever. Risking this, freedom, and maybe, our lives for the benefit of the old patriarchs is simply not worth considering. They will be gone, soon enough. It is time for a new generation to take charge... new minds with practical objectives... and subtle methods of obtaining power.” Smiling, Louisa said,

“We think alike on the things most important. From the beginning, I perceived we would get along well.”

EPILOGUE

For several days, the fate of Jane and Malvina remained out of mind for everybody save Caudwell Thomas. Having replaced the detectives watching the ladies with several ordinary watchmen was a blunder. When the fire roared over the bluff onto First Avenue, the watchmen were overtaken by the crowd of residents fleeing the neighborhood and the firemen and volunteers rushing in. They gawked dumbfounded as the Episcopal Church went up in flames. It was only after danger crept within less than a block did they cease waiting for somebody in authority to issue orders. Rushing inside to save the ladies, they found every room empty – not even the evening staff. All left together, racing for the safety of the railroad depot; and after that proved hopeless, each ran off in their own way. The watchmen escaped when they realized that the house caught fire. Thomas, being at his residence south of Commerce Street, was unable to enter the burnt district until the next afternoon. The Wyche Mansion was nothing more than its charred foundation. Every stick of wood was incinerated to white ash. The mangled remains of the pipes that supplied gas for the lighting were melted together. What survived intact were the cellar and the underground stone lined coal bin. Until he learned from the police that two women fitting the description of Jane and Malvina made it to the eastern edge of town, Thomas thought the ladies were among the piles of bones of the deceased that Dr. Lovejoy was finding.

By November 28, Thomas received a telegram from Jane's New York attorney stating that the ladies were safe and on their way to Europe. Furthermore, a suit against Thomas was being prepared unless he relinquished his grip on the Colonel's estate. The message ended with a request to sell the lots that once contained the Wyche Mansion and the McAdams House. The necessary papers were forthcoming. Eventually, the railroad purchased the parcel on which the Wyche Mansion stood. While clearing, workers found the leather case of bearer bonds in the cellar and delivered them to Mr. Thomas. Finally, he achieved his victory, in part. Obviously, Sarah Huffman's

damning letter was not included – it did not exist. The identities of the remaining members of the Huffman gang were lost to history; yet, he was able to deliver half of the bonds to Newton & LeQuire. The latter quickly put them on the market. Even with half, the firm recouped their initial loss – they were originally purchased at a discount. It ended there.

As Gaston expected, the rebuilding of the railroad district and the First Ward kept the mill running at full capacity. Thereafter, the fortune of the murderous couple grew at an ever increasing pace. During this time, Captain Jeremiah Littlefield died. The next patriarch of the *Kinsfolk* was a Gaston Calder. He formally rescinded the order to kill Thomas, and placed at the fore an imperative to exploit the devastation in Gilridge. Strategically, the families pooled their resources and purchased industrial and commercial lots in the burnt district. Soon, one of them established a textile mill on the east side of town. Captain John Frederick Huffman was charged with organizing the “gray hoods”, occasionally leading night missions to crush out social and political reform. Alvin Littlefield, a successful cotton broker, became the executioner for the secretive inner circle. He was very subtle in his methods.

For the younger generation of the *Kinsfolk*, things went well; their secret crimes and those of their parents remained hidden. Not so for their children. Louisa’s daughter Lucille perturbed their long run of luck when she married an intemperate lout named Peter Huffman, later known as the “Demon of the Horse Pond.” During the years of the First World War, Pete and his mother led the family into the realm of bootlegging and vice. Sheriff George Tate, the son of Sheriff William Tate, waged an unrelenting battle against the “gray hoods” and street bosses well into the 1920s. Coroner Hugh Wilson, the son of Dr. John Wilson and Myrtle Klieneburger Wilson, was challenged by a string of baffling murders during the same time. The arraying of two families against each other culminated when George Tate’s sister-in-law, Ethel Rouse, the granddaughter of James Rouse, began using her research skills to help the sheriff. Eventually, the past returned to haunt the *Kinsfolk*. The Huffman and Littlefield lines came to an end when fate and ambition collided. This is a story in its own right, chronicled in another text.

Judith Greene never returned to Gilridge. Eventually, she left for France; Dr. Phillip Greene followed her in the summer of 1883. In 1890, she published a memoir of her adventures during the Civil War. This book answered many of the lingering questions remaining about Colonel Wyche and Fred McAdams. Furthermore, it hinted at the true reason why Judge Coats was murdered. Her son Jackson, working in London for a group of American investors, frequently visited his parents. Once, he learned from his mother that Malvina had a third side to her. Unlike Susan, this person was silent. All the same, she was a talented writer of fiction.